



All Things New, Beginning With You

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

The First Sunday after Christmas ~ December 30, 2018

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalms 147:13-21

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| 13 Jerusalem will worship you, O God, *
and Zion will praise your name. | 18 You scatter your hail like bread crumbs; *
who can stand against your cold? |
| 14 For you have strengthened the bars of our gates *
and have blest our children within them. | 19 You send forth your word and melt them; *
you blow with the wind, and the waters flow. |
| 15 You have established peace on our borders *
and satisfied us with the finest wheat. | 20 You declare your word to Jacob, *
your statutes and judgments to Israel. |
| 16 You send out your command to the earth, *
and your word runs very swiftly. | 21 You have not done so to any other nation; *
to them you have not revealed your judgments.
Alleluia! |
| 17 You give snow like wool *
and scatter hoarfrost like ashes. | |

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

It's such a miracle when babies begin to speak, isn't it? Babies pick up language more-or-less by osmosis, through a process that seems almost magical to those un-tutored in the science of language acquisition. As long as they hear language, nearly all children will learn to speak, while children who are never spoken to cannot and will not acquire language. And most of us don't need or want to know much more about how it works. Talk to babies, and they'll eventually talk back. It's just that simple.

Everyone who's ever spoken was first spoken to. All the way back. Everyone's first words came from someone else. But what about God? What about God's words?

The Gospel of John tells us: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* From the very beginning, we are told, God has had something to say.

And God's speech, echoing through the cosmos brought entire worlds into being.

And as John tells it: eventually God's Word, when those worlds were ripe, was spoken into flesh, into the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God's Word became incarnate, giving God some skin in the game of being human, enabling God to speak to us far more directly than God had ever been able to speak through prophets or wisdom-bearers of yore.

Of course, God has been speaking since the very beginning. God doesn't speak for the first time in Jesus. But we humans haven't always been able to hear God's Word. God's Word hasn't always pierced through the world's din. So eventually God realized that God needed to reveal to us what has always been true within Godself. God needed to reveal that from all eternity, God has been a conversation, a relationship. In traditional language and imagery...that God, in God's self, is the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. God doesn't have relationships. God is relationship. And God needed a new strategy for communicating this reality, for reaching into the world and sharing the relational joy of the Divine life.

And Jesus, of course, was this new strategy. The embodied Word. Fully human, and fully divine. The complete revelation and communication of all that God is. The fleshy presence of the Word that pre-existed all other words. The Word that gave us life taught us all to speak.

But why, why bring the theological complexity of the Word, of the Trinity, into the simple beauty of the Christmas season? Why can't we just stay at the manger, adoring the cute baby, just a little longer?

Well, I think perhaps because it would be far too easy for us to stay at the manger indefinitely. Too easy to allow our vision to narrow and to forget the cosmic significance of Jesus' birth. Too easy to imagine Jesus as little more than a backwater baby who grew up to have a few really good ideas about God. Rather than as God's best idea; the totality of Godself, incarnate.

You see, as Jesus grows up, the idea of incarnation becomes more difficult to swallow. It seems so beautiful at first, at the manger: God has become one of us; sharing the whole of our human condition; knowing and loving us in the midst of our broken humanity.

But incarnation has other implications, too. If Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, then Jesus expresses all of God. Jesus is not merely a part of God, a segment of God, but God's full expression of Godself in time and space. No remainder, nothing left out. So if we want to know who God is, according to generations of Christian theologians, we need only get to know Jesus.

Which is all well and good, except that knowing Jesus seems to necessarily involve some unsavory aspects: being in fellowship with the despised and rejected; rejecting all systems of domination and disempowerment, even if they benefit us; all the way to accepting the humiliation of Jesus' death on the Cross.

But can't we at least wait until Lent for the sad, hard stuff, you might wonder?

It's best we don't, I think, because "sad and hard" cannot be easily be cordoned off in the seasonal section. And neither can comfort and joy, of course. With Jesus, we get all of it, all the time. Because we have a God who claims our whole lives, a God who holds nothing back and who desires the same from us.

Jesus was born to invite us more fully into God's life. It's a life that includes everything. That has room for everything. Suffering and joy side-by-side all the way down.

We mark people's entry into this life in the sacrament of baptism, which we will celebrate here today [at the 11:00 o'clock service]. And each and every time we celebrate baptism, we have an opportunity to imagine once again what it looks like to live a life that holds nothing back, a life fully taken up into the divine rhythm of love, a life

that has room for everything.

That may not be what you think we're up to in baptism. Baptism may seem more like a baby dedication than an invitation into God's life of self-giving love. But make no mistake about it: Jesus was not born primarily to teach us how to live good lives, but rather, to prepare a place for us within the very life of God. To show us the way into that life, and to make us co-heirs of God's coming Kingdom.

To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

This is the promise of baptism. This is also the promise of Christmas. God has come in Jesus to make all things new, beginning with you. And it's never, ever too late to accept his invitation.

May it be so.

Amen.