



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Jesus Has Come Anyway

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 26, 2021

The First Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

We cannot wait till the world is sane
To raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!
(Excerpt from "First Coming" by Madeline L'Engle)ⁱ

Merry Christmas ... on this first Sunday after Christmas! By now, most of our Christmas festivities are behind us. The presents have been opened, the Christmas dinner has been served and enjoyed, hopefully the dishes have been done, and I hope that wherever you are, you were able—in some form or another—to gather safely with family and friends.

This was not the Christmas we were expecting. I think we all thought that by now we'd be able to have a Christmas celebration that was approaching normal. But, again this year, it was not to be. Due to the increasing Covid case numbers, many of us had to cancel or curtail our Christmas plans; we had to put limits on family gatherings, or maybe even skip them altogether.

This December Omicron surge has us feeling exhausted, frustrated, and confused. With the pandemic dragging on, we've had a roller coaster ride of emotional ups and downs, constantly changing our plans, and worrying about our own health and safety, as well as the health and safety of the most vulnerable among us. So our Christmas joy may be dampened again this year by anxiety and disappointment, and maybe even some anger and resentment.

Exhaustion, frustration, anger, resentment—these are not the words I would normally choose to begin a Christmas sermon. But that's the reality of our world right now. And that's the reality of the world into which Jesus has come ... anyway.

Jesus has come into this world anyway, not in spite of our problems, but because of them. He has come because things are not all right with our world. He has come to know our pain and our suffering and our sorrow. He has come into a troubled world to abide with us, and to love us, no matter what. And as Madeline L'Engle tells us in her poem "First Coming," "We cannot wait till the world is sane to rejoice."

The opening verses of John's Gospel that we just heard are known as the Prologue. In these few short lines, John takes us on a cosmic journey from primordial Creation to the actuality of the Incarnation; from a transcendent, universal, all-powerful God, to a particular human being, humble and vulnerable, who lived and died in 1st-century Palestine.

The Prologue is John's version of the nativity story. No angels or shepherds or baby in a manger here. Instead, John begins the story at the beginning of time itself—"In the beginning was the Word ..."—using the same words that begin the Book of Genesis. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ..." (Gen 1.1). He describes an eternal, preexistent Christ, the cosmic Christ, the *Logos*—the Word—spoken by God that brought all Creation into being. The Word was the creative force from which all life comes, an infinite abundance of life at the moment of Creation: Life and Light.

Because of these opening sentences, where Jesus is introduced as "the Life" and "the Light," John's Gospel has always been thought of as the "spiritual" Gospel. It is so distinct from Matthew and Luke, who tell of Christ's coming with different stories, equally miraculous but more accessible and human-scaled: the familiar stories of Mary and Joseph and their baby Jesus lying in a manger in the little town of Bethlehem.

Still, if we read John's Prologue closely, we can see in this beautiful, poetic language how he brings that cosmic Christ right into our midst so that we may know him as well as we know that baby in the manger. "No one has ever seen God," John writes. "But God the only Son ... has made him known."

God was made known to us through this one man, Jesus, who lived in a particular time and in a particular place, who came into a world that was certainly as troubled as our own. He didn't live among the wealthy, or the powerful, or the people who had it all together; he came to the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the suffering, and the outcast. And He comes to us today.

God came into the world that He loves, to live with us, to work with us, to eat with us, to sweat with us, to laugh with us, to cry with us, to suffer with us, and to die with us. This primordial, transcendent, unknowable God, the God of Life and Light, loves us so much, and wants to be known by us so deeply, that God became one of us in all of our humanity. That kind of love can change the world. And it did. And it still does.

This most "spiritual" of the four Gospels paints a picture of Jesus that, in its own way, is as heartbreakingly tender and loving as Mary and Joseph with their new-born baby. It can lead us to an intimacy with God that the Incarnation makes possible, an intimacy so close that it might even make us feel a little uncomfortable.

How close does God want to be to us? John writes: "the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart ..." The Greek word translated as "heart" actually means "bosom." It gives us an incredibly beautiful image of God's only son resting on his parents' bosom. If that image sounds familiar, it's because it shows up again at the end of John's Gospel, just before Jesus' Passion and death, when the beloved disciple reclines on Jesus' bosom. Just as Jesus abides in the bosom of God, so we, as God's children, are invited to abide in Him, to take our rest in Him, to be nurtured and fed by Him. Can you imagine, just for a moment, resting in that love?

God's love for God's children is an ancient and eternal story that begins before the beginning of time. It carries through from Creation, through the wilderness time of Exodus and Exile, and is made known in its fullness through Jesus. Through this gift of steadfast relationship with God's children, we have received grace upon grace. That is the true source of our Christmas joy.

A few nights ago, I heard an interview with Dr. Francis Collins, the Director of the National Institute of Health. Dr. Collins is about to retire from that position, where he has been serving for twelve years under three different Presidents. He has been at the forefront of this country's Covid vaccine development, and he was one of the scientists who worked on the Human Genome Project decoding our human genetic make-up. He is well aware of the extraordinary capabilities of humankind to create and achieve great

things. He is also a man of deep Christian faith. When the interviewer asked how his faith informs his work, he said, first of all, that it gives him a moral framework for the ground-breaking science that he does, which often veers into uncharted ethical territory.

And then he continued: “For me as a scientist, though, [my faith] takes on additional consequences when a new discovery happens, because I see God as the author of all that we have been given. That means that the laboratory is also potentially a cathedral, because what we’re doing is to learn how to be even more amazed at what we have been given as human beings surrounded by a beautiful world.”ⁱⁱ

Here's a man who has spent his life in science searching for the origins of life on a genetic level, and he still has a sense of wonder and amazement at the abundant, life-giving gift God has given us, a world where even a laboratory can become a cathedral. In this Christmas season, it is more important than ever to hold on to our wonder and amazement at the gift we have been given, and to treat our world as if it was as sacred as a cathedral. Because it is.

Maybe this wasn't the Christmas we were expecting. God knows, we're tired of this pandemic. But Jesus has come to us anyway. And in him, we remember that our Christmas joy is a joy that transcends time and space . . . that outlasts empires and presidents and pandemics. That is where we find our hope. Hold this hope close this Christmas. Rest in the loving embrace of God. Open your hearts to the one who opens his heart to us. Jesus has come to us anyway, this year. So let's learn to be even more amazed at the wondrous gift God has given to this troubled, imperfect, beautiful world.

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://www.madeleinelengle.com/portfolio-item/first-coming/>

ⁱⁱ Woodruff, Judy. “Dr. Collins Reflects on Career at NIH, Covid Response Effort, Work on Genome Sequencing.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 20 Dec. 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/dr-collins-reflects-on-career-at-nih-covid-response-effort-work-on-genome-sequencing>.