
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

To Make God Known

A Sermon by

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Scripture: John 1:1-18

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🎵 God is still speaking,

I want to congratulate you, this morning! You made it! You made it to the day after Christmas!

You made it to the day after the pageant in which—remarkably—none of the little ones ran howling down the aisle into the arms of a red-faced parent during a peaceful lullaby. And we made it to the day after Advent when we could sing our beloved Christmas carols to our hearts content.

And now we've even made it to the day after New Year's Eve. To the day after fabulous parties where we watched the ball drop on Times Square and probably overdid it a bit. Did you really eat five Swedish meatballs, four slices of pizza, three quesadillas, two pieces of pie, one ham sandwich, and a partridge in a pear tree?!? What were you thinking?

Our lives are filled with important days that we wait for:

- the day of graduation,
- the day of the wedding,
- the day the young one is adopted or born,
- the day of the milestone birthday—the one with the zero,
- the day our child moves out of the house,
- the day our child finally moves all his stuff out of the house (at age 35),
- the day we retire,
- and many, many more.

But each of these important days finally comes and goes. And then we wake up on the day after. Now what?

The last few years, the day after Christmas has stirred me to thinking about what this Christmas hoopla is all about. I'm not talking about the commercialization of Christmas—the nooks and crannies of that subject have been well explored already. Most of us deplore how commercialized Christmas has become, even though to some extent we participate in it the craziness. But that's not what I think about on the day after.

What I'm puzzling over again this year is all those words we said, and sang, and read leading up to Christmas; all those words about this person who walked the earth 2,000 years ago.

Last week I was in Ohio visiting my Mom. We had a great time—thank you for the week off. I savored each day. I had a chance to scrape ice off my windshield again and to clear the porch and steps of snow after a good storm. We don't really think of blizzards coming to Phoenix, but I think we do experience a blizzard each year even here in Phoenix. Each December we experience a blizzard of words about this man Jesus.

We read words like these:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined... For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken... For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Beautiful words, aren't they? Hopeful?

And we sing words like these:

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Fall on your knees! O, hear the angels' voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born...

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;
And in His name all oppression shall cease.

Inspiring words, aren't they?

And then the alarm clock rings on December 26th, and we begin life the day after Christmas. Now what?

What about all those inspiring and beautiful and hopeful words that we read and sang in preparation for the big day? We may be tempted to think they're just empty words.

In our Wednesday Campus Bible Study, each year in December we take some time to notice how the four gospel writers describe the events of Jesus' birth. No doubt you're familiar with them, but allow me a quick recap:

Mark, the first gospel to be written, records nothing at all about Jesus' birth. Not a single word. If we only had Mark's gospel, we probably wouldn't have Christmas. Apparently Mark didn't think the birth and early years of Jesus' life were important at all, so he left this part out of his telling of the story.

Matthew, perhaps the next gospel to be written, tells the story like most histories were written, writing about the "important" people. Not surprisingly for the times, the important people to Matthew were men. Though Mary is the one who will be pregnant, the whole story is told through Joseph's eyes—the angel Gabriel comes to Joseph in a dream, not Mary. We don't hear anything from Mary herself in Matthew's account.

We hear from Joseph, and we hear a lot about King Herod and his male advisors—the chief priests and scribes—and those wise men from the east who must have been wealthy to bring gold, frankincense and myrrh.

You could say that Matthew is a typical man, focusing on the concerns of men, writing the story about the "important" people, like most histories were written in the day.

Luke, tells another story altogether. In Luke's account, the angel Gabriel visits Mary, not Joseph, and we hear everything from Mary's point of view. Mary is likely young, almost certainly uneducated, as was the custom for women, probably poorer, and definitely from the wrong side of the tracks—Nazareth was kind of the backwater of the region.

Luke also tells us the story of Mary's elderly relative Elizabeth, who was unable to have children, which was a great shame in that day.

And Luke writes about the shepherds, who were definitely at the bottom of the social heap.

Luke is the only gospel writer who tells us about an old widow, the prophet Anna, who lived on charity in the temple and came to offer her blessing to the child.

And Luke tells us about Simeon, an older man who also gave his beautiful blessing to the child.

Luke writes about the people who rarely made the standard history books, women, the poor, and the outcasts.

And then there's the last gospel to be written, John's gospel, which we read from today. John, like Mark, writes nothing at all about Jesus' birth or childhood. Not a word.

He offers no historical facts about Jesus' early life. You couldn't do an archeological dig based on anything in the first part of John's gospel.

That's because John is not interested in the facts of Jesus' life. John is interested in the meaning of Jesus' life.

- Why did he come?
- What was his life about?
- What claim does Jesus' make on his followers?
- What promises are offered to those who choose to follow Jesus' way?

John cares nothing about the specific details of Jesus' birth. But he does care deeply about the question that concerns us here today: "How then shall we live?" He cares about how then shall we live on the day after Christmas, the day after the New Year begins with such hope and promise?

And so John uses beautiful and inspiring words, poetry really, to describe who Jesus is, and what claims he makes on the lives of his followers, and, perhaps most importantly, what promises are offered to those who risk following in Jesus' way.

When you read the way John portrays the Jesus story compared with Matthew and Luke, you could say that Matthew and Luke are filming at street level, showing the details of the story, while John's camera pans from somewhere far out in the solar system. John writes about the big picture:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God.

³All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being ⁴in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
⁵The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it...

to all who received him,
who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God...
From his fullness we have all received,
grace upon grace.

John steps back from the details of the story. He has no interest in mangers and myrrh, in taxation or jealous kings. He tells us plainly elsewhere in his gospel that he's written his gospel so that we "may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life..."

And so right out of the gate, he begins making his case.

It is tempting, very tempting, when listening to the news filled with

- stories of greed and economic uncertainty,
- of increasing rates of addiction, depression, and abuse,
- stories of political intrigue and corruption,
- of violence and war that seems to have no end,

it is very tempting, to say that John simply didn't know what he was talking about, that the darkness has overcome the light, that his gospel, his good news, is nothing more than a bunch of beautiful, inspiring, hopeful words that at the end of the day are empty.

I don't know about you, but on any given day, I can lose sight of God's good intention, overcome by another blizzard of words, a blizzard of bad news and darkness so intense that I have trouble keeping my bearings.

That's why I'm part of this faith community. That's why we come together week after week. That's why we stop by the library after the service and check out some of the amazing books that our volunteer staff has assembled to help us remember who we are. That's why we participate in work projects, serving others, and why we come to Taste & See on Wednesday evenings to share a meal and study or even dance together.

About a month ago, Evelyn & Dale Christenson recommended to me the book *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson. Last week on vacation I finally picked it up, and I simply couldn't stop reading it. Greg writes of his failed attempt in 1993 to climb K2, which is the second highest mountain in the world located in northern Pakistan along the border with China.

As Greg made his way back down the mountain in a weakened haze, he lost his way and drifted into an impoverished Pakistan village, where the Muslim village leader took him in and provided him food and a warm place to sleep. Some days later, as Greg began to learn more about the villagers and their way of life, he asked if he could see their school.

After an embarrassing hesitation, he was taken to an open field, where 82 children, 78 boys and 4 girls were kneeling on the frosty ground studying together. The village couldn't afford its own teacher, he was told, so they share one with another village. Today the children were quietly practicing the lessons the teacher had given them the previous day. Many of them were writing in the dirt with sticks, which was all they had.

Greg was overcome with amazement at the desire and determination of these children to learn, and without knowing how he would do it, he promised the village leader that he would return and build them a school.

In the years that followed, that unlikely relationship between an American climber who is Christian and a Pakistani villager leader who is Muslim resulted in more than fifty schools being built in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, the very areas that are strongholds of the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden. And schools continue to be built there, even now long after 9/11, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have stirred up mistrust and hatred between Muslims and Christians.

It's tempting to give in to the blizzard of bad news that threatens to blot out the light of the world.

But John argues otherwise—John encourages us that all who receive Jesus, who follow the ways of Jesus, who work to tear down walls, who are learning to forgive, who with God's help work to reconcile us to each other, to all who are growing to trust and believe in Jesus more fully, not merely in words, but in action, in daily living, to them he gives power to become children of God.

And for that journey, which will have its bumps, as we so well know John reminds us of the promise of Jesus that from that from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. And God knows we need it. God knows what this world needs is more grace. Grace for ourselves and our shortcomings, and grace for each other in our life together.

It's true that we read and sang a lot of beautiful, inspiring and hopeful words as we prepared for Christmas. And some of us may have made some beautiful resolutions in preparation for the New Year.

But it's also true that on

- the day after Christmas,
- the day after New Years,
- the day after the wedding, (or the divorce),
- or the baptism, (or the burial),
- or the new job begins, (or we're fired),
- or we reach retirement,

John encourages us that “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God... and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”

Friends, this is the good news: whatever may happen in our lives, be it good or bad, our faith teaches us that we have been given power and grace for every day after.

Amen.