



## Christmas Day (III)

### Understanding the Word

[RCL] Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4,(5-12); John 1:1-14

Merry Christmas!

Today is a beautiful day in which we celebrate the incarnation of God through the birth of a baby boy by the name of Jesus. In a year that has been beset with unanticipated challenges and the spread of a virus, we still have so much for which to be grateful.

Today, many presents will be exchanged. Some were shipped well in advance of this day in order to ensure timely delivery. Others will be offered in person. Nationwide, spending this year is expected to surpass last year's gift-giving by a wide margin. Dinner may look a little different as we share meals over Zoom instead of large family-style gatherings, and indeed, we are still grateful. Our normal traditions have been greatly altered, and yet the day is just as special.

This is also the time in which we are called to celebrate the magic that is Christmas. We rejoice as we recall the miraculous birth of the baby born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary. We retell the story of the incarnation of God – the God the world did not know and who came into the world in the humblest of circumstances. Jesus was born in a barn, wrapped in a blanket, and laid in an animal trough as his bed. His humble start did not begin to reflect the story of his true nature. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson used to sing a beautiful rendition of the hymn, *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*:

Sweet little Jesus boy,  
They made you be born in a manger.  
Sweet little holy child,  
We didn't know who you were -  
Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord,  
To take our sins away.  
Our eyes were blind, we could not see -  
We didn't know who you were.

The Gospel of John offers us a profound explanation of who that sweet little Jesus boy was. He writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." We are told from the outset that Jesus was the Word, Son eternal and present before Creation itself. Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John does not recount the story of the birth of Jesus. He

draws our attention to who Jesus is. Through John's account, it is clear that Jesus is the manifestation of God. He was *with* God and he *was* God. Even though the notion of Jesus both being God and being with God may sound confusing, our faith informs our belief. Jesus was sent to deliver a powerful message to God's people, yet he was a different kind of messenger. He was more than a prophet and he was a bigger force than angels.

The Word was God – and yet, people did not understand.

Jesus came into the world to know human suffering and to teach important lessons that would serve humankind forever. Ultimately, Jesus, the light of the world, came to deliver his people from sinful ways and point them toward salvation.

John the Baptist was a messenger from God who came ahead of the Christ to announce the coming of the Messiah. John informed the people that one much greater than he was coming and that the one coming behind him would be the savior of the world. John came to “testify to the light” so that all would believe. The baptizer also offered people an opportunity to repent and to be baptized with water so they would be prepared when the Lord arrived.

The people were filled with expectation, and still, they didn't recognize Jesus when he appeared to them. They did not know the one who had been sent to deliver peace to a fractured world. They could not comprehend the rabbi who preached forgiveness and hope. They would not accept the teachings of the carpenter's son who talked about love as the most important guiding principle for life.

In these tumultuous times, there are those who are still grappling with the incarnational God who calls us all children of the Holy One. We find ourselves struggling with what it means to be God's shining light in the world. On this day when we shower our friends and loved ones with presents, how have we gifted the world? What have we offered those with much less? How have we remembered the poor and the suffering? What is our gift to God?

COVID shuttered many of our small businesses this year. COVID forced major layoffs at many of our larger places of employment. There is a tremendous fear that many will be left homeless in the aftermath of this global pandemic. COVID has left countless widowed and orphaned.

As we wonder how and why God came to earth, let us be reminded of the grace that has been shown to us simply by God's presence. Our gift to God is our response to the human condition. It is personified in the ways we offer grace to our neighbors, near and far. During Jesus' physical time on earth, we were shown how to care for those with the greatest need. Jesus did not spend time dining with nobility, despite his divine status. Jesus was never to be crowned an earthly king, which was very confounding to the people of his day. Jesus dined instead with the marginalized and the outcasts. Like a laser beam, Jesus shined a light on injustice and forced his disciples to look inwardly, examining their hearts and minds to find the true meaning of life.

It is God's hope that present-day disciples will take time from the hustle and bustle of a busy holiday season to shine a light on the urgent matters of the day. Just like in ancient times, this world is in need of healing. So

many are feeling exhausted after a year of fractured relationships, mistrust, and disruption of normal life. The Word is still with us and the shining light of Christ will guide us out of the wilderness and despair.

God is nudging us, beloved, to take on the mantle of discipleship and serve the world in the name of his loving Son. There are numerous issues demanding our attention and there are many ways to get involved in helping all of God's children get to the Promised Land. You are needed now more than ever. Share the love of Christ with others who have been waiting a lifetime to hear the good news of Christmas that offers love and compassion. Rescue those in need just as you have been delivered by the power of God's everlasting mercy.

Today, we celebrate this holiday, the birth of Jesus, with festivities to whatever extent we deem appropriate. We give thanks for those who gather with us and those whom the Lord received into eternity. Make it a joyous occasion. The God of Creation invites us to recreate the meaning of this wonderful season in which miracles can truly happen. It is possible to live in a world filled with love and peace. As faith followers, you must believe that better days are ahead and then work to make that a reality.

After the celebrations end this season, let us draw our attention once again to creating the world that God intended. Let us commit ourselves to continuing the pilgrimage to the Promised Land with the assurance that God's light will show us the way and all we need to do is follow the directives of the Word.

Howard Thurman, an African American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader created a stunning poem called *The Work of Christmas* and it really defines the work before us:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.

May we all celebrate the joy of the Christmas season and give thanks for the continuing presence of the Creator. May the light of Jesus bring new life into this world and may it shine brightly forever. Amen.

*The Rev. Kathleen Walker is the missioner for black ministries in the Diocese of North Carolina. She works from the diocesan house in downtown Raleigh. She joined the bishop's staff in 2020 to focus on the vitality of historically Black congregations by helping to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018 and shortly thereafter joined the clergy team at St. John's Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Florida, as associate rector for pastoral care and parish life. She is originally from South Florida and was an active layperson in that diocese prior to discerning the call to ordained ministry.*