

Sermon for Christmas 1 2020 11 am
Occupy Christmas

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . (pls be seated)

In the beginning was the Word.

Ah, at last, there it is, like hint from a long-known but mysterious source, *The Word* draws us in and brings us closer to *known* and yet *new* understanding at each expression.

The Word, the very utterance of God is with us.

This year *The Word* comes from behind Covid-19 masks in a Christmas season unlike any in recent history . . . It has been a Christmastime in which rather than arriving early to get a good seat at church or celebrating with family and friends, we seek security and safety at home in small numbers instead.

I wondered if we'd be able to encounter Christmas without church as we've come to know it. I wondered how dependent *I* might be on the in-church rituals I so enjoy, the words and movements and music that help me know closeness to the God I so love.

Longing for us to be able to gather together, I remembered the very first Christmas I spent at Grace Cathedral. Walking in the procession, through the crowded congregation to the choir that year, I could feel the thrilled anticipation in the two thousand people packed shoulder to shoulder in the pews . . . candles aflame, smoke from the incense, the crescendo of brass and strings, it was a liturgical masterpiece . . . the exultancy of the Word among us was palpable.

But this year, we celebrated Christmas online, away from the cathedral, our hundreds of pageant angels, shepherds and magi at home, without choir or symphony or incense.

And despite what seemed long odds, The Word, the baby, the Christ child *is* here and with us!

There was and still is everything we need.

Thank God!

Knowing God is with us, how does this change things?
And what might we do?

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For several years I was lucky enough to help write the Christmas sermons at a university down on the peninsula.

On a normal Sunday, like most college chaplaincies, Memorial Church draws very few children, but the Christmas Eve service there always drew a maximum capacity crowd.

When I was first invited to write for them, I was told the Silicon Valley crowd came expecting “timeliness with a dash of witty innovation.”

It was a tremendously creative and fun experience. Our sermons attended to everything from Starbucks Christmas cup theology to Santa’s Sleigh crashing on the fiscal cliff because his elves were fighting over whether to go to the left or to the right.

One particularly memorable homily that our team wrote in 2011 has come to mind this year . . . If you remember 2011, and I wonder if that even seems

almost quaint after the year the world has just had, the issues that came to light that year on Wall Street and around the globe, have proven to be just as live this year.

During that Christmas Eve service in 2011, we set up a tent and sleeping bag around the altar and enlisted the congregation's help in making our point.

"This is a human megaphone," someone cried out. And perfectly on cue, the congregation replied, "This is a human megaphone."
"Occupy!" "Occupy" one side responded
"Christmas" "Christmas" the other side called back.
"Occupy Christmas" "Occupy Christmas" the two sides of the sanctuary chanted and then the crowd erupted in laughter.

The message was simple. With all the tension around us, amid the wonder of the Christmas season, we just wanted to *Occupy Christmas*. To stop everything and stay there.

I feel that way again this year again. I'd like to just hang onto the joy of this season, to occupy this feeling of comfort and light forever.

Wouldn't that be amazing?

The thing is, I can't. We can't. Well not for long anyway.

We can't remain in this place of bliss-seeking forever, not because the liturgical calendar will turn green and all the stores and media will forget about Christmas again.

No. We cannot occupy Christmas forever because if 2020 has shown us anything, it is that we have to *act* on the Word among us, not simply *chew on it* forever.

As we turn the corner to 2021 in a few days . . . the issues raised ten years ago by the Occupy Movement of racial, social and economic injustice that formed this country persist and are issues that need the hope this season offers.

These Justice issues demand our *best* not our *comfort*.

Beyond the suffering we have all endured collectively, this year has pointed out that for *too long, too few* have occupied *privilege* at the cost of *others humanity, let alone comfort*.

Surely and rightly, we worship in part to know God's presence with us. We celebrate Christmas and the word among us as sustenance. That encounter, that knowing of God is beautiful and essential.

So let's enjoy it – listen carefully, breathe it in fully and know this truth of God among us.

And then, let's get going. Because if we try to stay in this place forever, we will miss an essential point of God with us, that

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵

The Word of God, the presence of God among us beckons us to receive it and to communicate it back out to the world.

With more than 1.75 Million people killed by the Corona Virus, crushing societal inequality, political manipulation and mayhem, and all the loneliness and loss we've endured, could there be a time in recent history when we have needed more than we do now the hope that new life, the word among us, promises.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!

John's brilliant Gospel poetry comes to us again this first Sunday of Christmas offering just what we need—the simple, clear assurance that through it all, God has been, is, and will be with us.

Shielding the joyous, feeding the hungry, sheltering the anxious, and mending the broken hearted, the Prince of Peace bears witness with us, wherever we are.

So where are you?

Are you able to hear the movements of God in your life?

Do you know what to do with the nearness of God?

There was and still is everything we need: The word made flesh reminds us there is and has always been promise. Knowing this, we can be assured that there is *more* than comfort and Joy to take this season. There is *hope*, hope we can *act* on.

No matter your awareness of God's presence with you – whether you hear it clearly or wonder how to, I pray you trust enough to open yourself to hope. God will say what you need to hear and light your pathway forward.

It will be awhile yet before we are able to safely gather in person . . . but although we are separated physically, the promise of God among us has come again.

Together we will come through this difficult time.

So let us pray,
Holy One, fill us with your presence and help us to hear your word. This week as our calendars' mark time's passage from one year to the next, bring us ever closer to you.

Giver of Life, *occupy our hearts* and make us all prophets and doers of your word.

Amen