

GIFT HEAPED UPON GIFT

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Text: John 1:1–18

We have rung in the New Year. Many people have taken down their Christmas trees and lights and are now turning their attention to returning to work and school. While we are winding down our celebrations, I want to remind us that we remain in the season of Christmas. As such, it is fitting that we read this familiar prologue from the Gospel of John both as theological scaffolding for the start of a New Year and as ongoing celebration and observance of Christmas. Opening this Gospel with “In the beginning,” the writer harkens back to the creation story from the book of Genesis, with its account of God speaking into existence all there is and upholding it with the promise of newness and possibility. The New Year often feels like the most opportune moment for thinking about the newness and possibility of the upcoming year. At the same time, there is something profoundly meaningful in seeing this prologue, as one theologian has maintained, as “a Christmas story without the shepherds or angels, without long journeys by camel or donkey . . . without a manger or even a baby” (Susan E. Hulen). This is a Christmas story because when we strip it down to its essence, it reinforces the promise and purpose of the baby in the manger: that God incarnates life, light, and presence as pure gift to us.

Unfortunately, this is not how this text has been received and used over the years. In human hands, it has become the means by which God has been narrowed, controlled, and withheld. The words of this passage can be found in our familiar creeds, dogmas, and doctrines, which can sometimes flatten the radicality of God’s grace revealed in the Word becoming flesh in our midst. This poetic theological statement of Jesus’ origin, relationship, and identity has too often been distorted beyond the historical context in which it was written, etching anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in the church, our liturgy, and theology. In our religious and theological neglect or carelessness, we have taken a theological statement, a sermonic prologue for a people who needed to be reassured that God is always present with them no matter where they go, and turned it into a historical, sectarian claim, defining who is in and who is out, who is a child of God and who is not. And while we draw lines and boundaries and exclude and condemn, we miss what is truly on offer for all God’s children: grace upon grace, emanating from the fullness of God.

Let me make that clearer. In telling a story of Jesus’ origin, Jesus’ relationship with God, and Jesus’ identity as God’s son, the evangelist of John is telling us that God is giving the world the gift of God’s eternal presence. Just as God spoke creation into existence, God continues to speak through the Word made flesh, Jesus, a presence that came to exist in time and history. Not only does Jesus manifest what God is like, but in his closeness and preexistence with God, Jesus reveals that an abiding relationship with God is possible for all of us. The assurance is that we have access to God, that we are a part of God’s body, that God is the ground of our being beyond time, belief, birth, tradition, or religion. Because “no one had ever seen God,” we may wonder if God can be perceived, comprehended, known. The good news for all is that God’s abiding presence can be known, felt, and shared; that the purpose of all this is life and light for all emanating from the fullness of God. And it is eternal, abundant, overflowing. It is gift, all gift, nothing but gift, gift heaped upon gift. No heritage, no tradition, and no status earned or given can cause God’s

gift to be withheld or conferred. No creed, dogma, or doctrine can ever give us that gift. Only God's abiding presence can do that.

Now, I'm not naïve. I know that's not how we feel. I know that our theological language and religious tradition make it hard for us to comprehend the reckless abundance God offers us. But keep reading the Gospel of John; we find people just like us who could not imagine what grace upon grace could mean or what it means to abide in the presence of God until they met Jesus. And all of those who took the time to hear, receive, and open themselves to the Word made flesh came away from the encounter knowing what it means to be connected to, in relationship with, and abiding within the eternal presence of God. Gift heaped upon gift.

But this world rejects that gift over and over. Sometimes, we give into the better angels of our nature. We get glimpses of the light. When we allow ourselves to rise above the distractions, we see that divine glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. But we are often unmoved by the abiding presence of life and light. No matter how God manifests God's self, in every age and with each revelation, many refuse to recognize or accept the fullness of God. There are those who cannot comprehend the life and light on offer through the incarnate Word.

We need only look at how masses of people respond when they are afraid or when life becomes uncertain. Resentment, conspiracies, even violence abound in a world so disconnected from life and light. The *Washington Post* recently featured a story about the human susceptibility to misinformation and the persistence of conspiracy theories in our society and how social media has amplified our divisions and suspicions of each other. We don't trust our neighbor or our institutions, and to the extent we do trust someone, it is only those who reinforce what we already believe. One expert said it like this, "Our brains are not built for the truth" (David Linden, professor of neuroscience, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine). It is frightening to think that grace and truth cannot penetrate our fear, estrangement, and resentment. Perhaps that's why we rest in our anxiety, unable to be moved by the abiding presence of God: truth is too much for us to handle.

This state of our collective soul was dramatized in a recent movie that people have been talking about, *Don't Look Up*. When two scientists discover that a large meteor is barreling toward Earth with enough size and velocity to result in a life-extinction level event, they can't get political and business leaders or citizens to focus on a solution or work together to protect life. Everybody is so distracted or so acquisitive that they can't do what it takes to survive. Greed and amusement are the only ways people know how to respond to an existential threat. There was no sense among the masses that the gift of life and light was worth protecting or even if it mattered at all. There is futility, emptiness, and nihilism in a world known only for clawing for power, control, and immortality at the expense of neighbor.

But there is good news in our text today. Jesus embodied and made real God's gift of life and light to be received and embodied in the midst of our fear and anxiety. The good news is that grace and truth are comprehensible; God can be known; and life is intended to be lived abundantly. Jesus would declare it explicitly later on in the Gospel, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). And none of that depends on creeds, doctrines, or dogmas created over the years. We need not be divided nor concerned that God's love and presence are scarce, that this is a zero-sum game in competition with other faiths or no faith. We need not dismiss nor discount how others find the life and light that God reveals because it doesn't look like what we are comfortable with or it isn't consistent with what we received. We need not doubt that the ongoing presence of God remains with us through times of grief, loss, and disappointment. The fullness of God is big enough to encompass all who are open to the ways God reveals God's self. And God's intent, whether we are in first-century Palestine or twenty-first century United States, Europe, or Africa, is life and light to all God's children.

No, “no one has ever seen God,” but in the life and ministry of Jesus, who shares in the fullness of God and is intimately related to God, we get a glimpse of glory, God’s eternal presence, grace upon grace, gift heaped upon gift: gift that has no end because God is never depleted nor divided. Now, that’s a blessed Christmas story that we can tell throughout the year. May it be so.