

Illumination
Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 2:8–20; John 1:1 – 18
Sunday, June 27, 2021

We have just spent the past couple of weeks talking about the importance of *time* and *timing*; of knowing the right *seasons* in the world and in the church and in our lives and *living* in them; the importance of ordering our time so that we can live in harmony with God and with each other; and now we are celebrating Christmas in the middle of summer. And if you remember, I am a big stickler for not celebrating Christmas before it is *actually Christmas*. Author G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “There is no more dangerous or disgusting habit than that of celebrating Christmas before it comes.” And yet here we are.

But Chesterton’s *reason* for saying that is not what you’d think. He goes on to write, “It is the very essence of a festival that it breaks upon one brilliantly and abruptly; that at one moment the great day is *not*, and the next moment the great day *is*. Up to a certain specific instant you are feeling ordinary and sad; for it is only Wednesday. At the next moment your heart leaps up and your soul and body dance together like lovers; for in one burst and blaze it has become Thursday.” The idea is that holy festivals like Christmas should *surprise* us and *catch us off guard*. The prolonged build up to Christmas (which should start appearing in stores in just a few more months) can *dull us* to the full impact of the good news of that day. If you celebrate Christmas for *months*, when the day finally comes, it can be just another day.

So if that’s the case, then why are we celebrating Christmas in June? Because I guarantee you you did not come to worship today *expecting* to celebrate the birth of Christ. It surprised you. It caught you off guard. And so maybe in this unexpected advent, when we’re not preoccupied with wrapping presents and preparing meals, we can focus on what that day is really about.

When I first started seminary, I had to go to classes over the summer to learn how to read, write, and speak Greek. That's the language that the New Testament was first written in, so that's where they started us out. So for ten weeks, I went to class every morning for three hours and studied Greek. And I remember at first how overwhelming it all was. I open my textbook and my Greek New Testament and saw all these strange words and letters that kind of looked familiar, but didn't really make any sense to me. I knew there was a pattern in there somewhere, and I trusted that at some point I would figure it out and get the hang of it, but I just remember going back to my room that first day and thinking, "What in the world did I get myself into? This doesn't make any sense. How am I ever going to do this?" And I remember spending *five hours* that day just trying to learn the *alphabet*.

Living a life of faith can be a lot like trying to read Greek. It's right there in front of us, but we can't always piece it together and make sense out of it. Sometimes we read the Bible and feel like we're reading a completely different language. We know that there is a pattern in there somewhere, and we hope that at some point it will become clear and make sense to us, but sometimes it seems totally overwhelming! I mean, how do you *learn* God? How do you *know* God?

A lot of people say that we can *know* there is a God and *understand* God through nature. We can look at the natural world and see *God*. We can be connected to God through what God has created. Have you ever just seen an incredible sunset, where the whole sky just explodes in pink and red and orange and purple, and you have this feeling inside you like are witnessing something that God had done? Or you look through a telescope or at pictures from the Hubble Telescope and see these impossibly beautiful images of planets and stars and galaxies and nebulas, and you get this feeling like, "This can't be an accident. This has to be the work of God's own hand, creating and designing the universe. This shows us that God exists."

Scripture talks about this. Psalm 19 says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; the sky proclaims God’s handiwork.” Today’s reading from John says, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Creation is just so amazing and awe-inspiring and beautiful that it bears witness to the glory of God. We can look at the world and the universe around us and *know* that God exists.

But here’s the problem: looking at creation and trying to understand *anything* about God other than the fact that God exists is like trying to read Greek. You see all these things going on, all these pieces of the puzzle, but you can’t quite put them together to make sense out of them and form the larger picture. Creation tells us that there *is* a God, but it doesn’t tell us a whole lot *about* God. It’s like John says, “the world came into being through him; yet the world did not *know* him.”

After about four weeks of Greek school that summer, something amazing happened. We were getting ready to finish class for the day, when our professor said, “I want you take out your Greek New Testaments, open them up to page 312, and tell me what you see.” So I turned to that page and saw, “En arke en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros tone theon, kai theos en ho logos.” *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* It was this passage from John that we read this morning. All of a sudden all those strange symbols made sense and came together to *say something* that I could *understand*! It was like a light came on and I could read Greek! This thing that seemed so impossible to me before, I was actually *doing*. But it wasn’t because it made sense on its own, or because I just looked at it until I figured it out. It was because someone showed me how. Someone taught it to me and helped me understand. Someone opened it up to me.

And that is how God works. We don’t just learn about God and *get* God from looking at the world around us. It takes more than that to know God. It takes someone showing us. It takes someone

teaching us and helping us understand. And that someone *is God*. *God* revealed God's own self to us. *God* showed us who God is. And God did that by becoming one of us in Jesus Christ.

Years ago, Jen and I drove to Arkansas to visit some friends. This was before everyone had GPS on their phones or in their cars, so I printed off directions from the internet that showed us how to get there. We drove for 11 hours. But when we finally got off the interstate to get to their house, we realized that the directions were missing a step. We didn't know where to go. We had come all this way, but we couldn't get the rest of the way to their house because we didn't know how. So I called up my friend and said, "We're sitting at a gas station at this intersection, and I have no idea where to go." He said, "I know exactly where you are. Stay right there. I'll come get you." And a few minutes later he drove up and we followed him the rest of the way to their house.

That is exactly what *God* did. We could look at the world around us and only get *part* of the way to God. We could only figure out *so much*. We couldn't get the rest of the way to *knowing* and *understanding* God because we didn't know *how*. So God said, "I will come to you and show you the way." We were lost in darkness, we couldn't see the way to God, so God shined light into our darkness and showed us how to get there. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory*. God came to us in Jesus Christ to lead us out of the darkness and show us who God is and what God is like. God said, "I am going to become *one of you* so that you can know me." It's like John writes, "No one has ever *seen* God. It is God the only Son...who has made him known to us."

This is why Christmas is so important. It was on Christmas that God revealed God's self to us in Jesus Christ to show us what *God* is like and what God wants *us* to *be* like. This is why we should think about Christmas and celebrate Jesus' birth more than once a year. It's a reminder that we are not just left on our own to seek *God* and figure *God* out. God sought *us*. God came into the darkness of this world, the darkness of our lives and showed us who God is so that we could *see* and *understand*; so that we could

have *light* in our darkness. Jesus' birth shows us that God *wants* us to know God. God *wants* to be in relationship with us, so that we can come to know what God created us for and why we are here. As much as we look at and study the universe and the world around us, that is the one question that we cannot answer on our own.

The *real* meaning of Christmas isn't just a once-a-year thing. Christmas is the story of God coming into the kind of world where we live *every single day*. It's the story of God coming into a world where there is sickness and death and war and injustice and poverty and hatred and despair, not just 2,000 years ago, but *today*. It's the story of God fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote that "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. The boots of all 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 Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He will establish and uphold his kingdom with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore." The darkness back then is the same darkness that we *still* live in today. The promise of Isaiah is the same promise that we still need to hear today – war turned to peace, freedom from burdens and oppression, people living in a land of deep darkness seeing the light of justice and righteousness.

As author Madeleine L'Engle writes in her poem, "First Coming,"

God did not wait 'til the world was ready,
'til nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.
God did not wait till hearts were pure.

In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame,
God came and God's Light would not go out.
God came to a world which did not mesh;
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh,
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

With the birth of Jesus, *God with us*, there is the hope that things can be different.¹ That *we* can be different. That our *world* can be different. There is the hope that, with God's help, we can find our way *through* the darkness. God comes to us and *shows us how*, so that *we* can be the ones who turn war to peace and work for justice and righteousness, removing the yoke of burden from across people's shoulders and breaking the rods of the oppressors, the instruments that keep people down, keep them from *really living*. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." He has come to illuminate the world. But then Jesus said, "*You* are the light of the world. So let your light shine before others, that they may see *your* good works and give glory to God in heaven."

That's why we're celebrating Christmas in June. To be reminded that God is with us, not just *one* day, but *every* day, and that no matter what darkness surrounds us in this world, in our lives, God has not left us alone to figure out the way. God came to us in Jesus Christ to lead us through the darkness so that we can shine light into the world. And God will keep on teaching us, leading us, revealing God's self to us in *new ways* every day through the power of the Holy Spirit. The light shines in the darkness, not just on one special day, but *every* day, and the darkness will *never* overcome it. May it shine in us and through us, in the name of Jesus. Merry Christmas.

¹ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994. Pg. 235.