

Every Christmas I look forward to singing "O' Holy Night" with my church family. This song assures me that what I truly need in life doesn't originate on earth. It comes from heaven. What I truly need is hope, peace, joy, and love. And this was given to me as a gift the first Christmas on that Holy Night over 2000 years ago.

Have any of you ever heard of the Joshua Bell Experiment? If you have never heard of Joshua Bell, he is a gifted violinist, a prodigy who began playing at age four and made his debut at Carnegie Hall by age 17. The Joshua Bell Experiment happened 11 years ago. On January 12, 2007, Joshua Bell emerged from the Washington DC Metro and positioned himself against a wall. He was a young man in jeans, wore a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap - pretty nondescript. From a small case he removed a violin; and placing the open case at his feet, he threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money and began to play.

For the next 45 minutes, Bell played Bach, Schubert, Massenet, and Ponce as over 1,000 people streamed by, most hardly taking notice. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized that the young man was a once in a generation. They also might have noticed that the violin he played was a rare Stradivarius worth over 3,000,000 dollars.

Earlier that the week, Joshua Bell sold out the Boston Symphony Hall. Seats went for one hundred dollars each. In the subway, Bell collected a whopping thirty-two dollars from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation. Twenty-seven people caught a glimpse of the beauty that came from the man playing the violin by the trash can in the DC Metro station that morning.

It was all part of a project arranged by the Washington Post, what they called, "an experiment in context, perception, and priorities." The Washington Post wanted to know, "In a banal, (ordinary and dull) setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?"

Two thousand years ago, a night started out as ordinary and dull as any other night, but then it turned original and fresh. That night became a Holy Night. Beauty had come to earth. God entered our world in the most perfect way, but people were caught up in their own contexts, perceptions, and priorities. Few saw the beauty of what happened in the manger that night.

As we think about life on the peninsula, most of us are caught up in our own context, our own perceptions, our own priorities

and most of us hardly stop to listen. Sure, we may throw him a tip as we walk by, or sing a catchy carol, or raise a glass, but we fail to see the beauty of what happened in the manger that night. Our hunger for something new, something original, something beautiful, and something truly transcendent is not satisfied by the cultural Christmases we are so familiar with. Sadly, most of us miss out on what only God can give us this Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love. All of which came to us through the birth of Jesus on that picture-perfect Christmas.

So, who is this Jesus? Let's start His picture-perfect story at the beginning. John, a former fisherman by trade, and one of Jesus disciples told us:

In the beginning was the Word

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. John 1: 1-3

Logos is the Greek word for "word." *Logos* entered the English language in words like logic and logical. Why didn't John say in the beginning was the Son, or in the beginning was Jesus, or in the beginning was the Lord? Why *logos*? Because *logos* strikes a chord deep within every culture John knew about. To the Greeks, the *Logos* means the source of life, which makes life work. The *Logos* was the integrating principle behind the entire universe, which makes all the laws of nature and physics reliable. To the Jewish philosophers, the *Logos* was the agent of creation and the guiding force for all divine activity in the world. And for most Jews In John's day, the *Logos* was that by which the living God communicated with humanity. And John then showed his hand and told us that the *Logos*, the Word was a He.

John said the Word was a person. The Word was in his essence the eternal God, Equal with God the Father in every way. The Word spoke the universe into existence out of nothing. And all knowledge, innovation, and all wisdom were created by him and revealed to us by Him. And another detail lest I forget. The Word is Jesus.

What else did John say about the Word?

The Word was life and light

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[a] it. vv. 4-5

The Word is life. He imparts physical life into all living creatures on earth. But for people, who God made in His image, He imparts more than physical life; he imparts life that is light to all mankind. What is this nonphysical life he calls light? It's what encompasses our soul, our spirit, our intellect, our spiritual perception, our conscience, and our subconscious. All this comes from the *Logos*. It's a light that allows us to look out at our world and see right and wrong, good and evil, man's folly and God's glory. We can look out and see a picture. And sometimes that picture is beautiful, and it takes a form of a mountain, a flower, an act of love, and inspiring song, or a painting from an inspired artist.

This light not only allows us to look out and see things outside ourselves. But this light also allows us to look in and see inside ourselves, and see the strange contradictions in our souls. The light allows us to see our capacity for doing good as well as our bent toward doing evil. The light allows us to see we hunger for hope and wonder while we still struggle in despair, we hunger for peace and wonder why we wallow in anxiety and fear, we hunger for joy, and wonder why we feel trapped in a place of pain and sadness, we try to satisfy an insatiable desire to be loved, and yet find ourselves still lonely and isolated.

In John's day, people believed that to have life they needed air, water, food, and light. And John, in his written account of Jesus' life, tells us that Jesus is all four of these things. In chapter three, John wrote that Jesus was the BREATH of Life. In chapter four, John wrote that Jesus was the WATER of Life. In chapter six, Jesus said he was the BREAD of Life. And here in chapter one, John wrote that Jesus was the LIGHT of life.

What makes the picture-perfect Christmas? It's that:

The true light came into our darkness to invite us into His new family

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. vv. 9-11

The true light came into the world and shined on everyone. The true light exposed the good, the bad, and the ugly in our world. The light exposed the deceit in everyone's heart. The ugly stuff kind of stays invisible unless you have the true light shining on it. The true light reveals the sins deep within us. And that kind of exposure is more than most people can handle. John said, even his own people, his fellow Jews, rejected Him on a large scale.

Jesus came to earth to bring his light into our lives not to make us feel bad, but to expose the dirt so he could clean it up. Stephen Kingsley of Craigmont, Idaho runs a carpet cleaning business in which he offers a special service for removing pet odors. To show potential customers their need for the service, he darkens the room and then turns on a powerful black light. The black light causes the urine crystals to glow brightly. To the horror of the

homeowner, every drop and dribble can be seen, not only on the carpet, but also on the walls, drapes, furniture, and even the lampshades. Kingsley said one homeowner begged him to shut off the light: "I can't bear to see anymore. I don't care what it costs. Please clean it all up!"

The problem was there all the time, but it was invisible until the right light exposed it. Wouldn't it have been cruel of Kingsley to expose their dirt and then say, "Too bad for you." Then pack up his black light and walk away? Instead, he brought the light so that they might desperately want his cleaning services. And that's precisely why the Word came to earth. He brought the light of his presence not to make us feel bad, but to expose the dirt so that he could clean it up if we ask him to.

Please let him clean you up. Stop trying to mask the pain and hide the sin. Instead, welcome the Word. Welcome the True Light, Welcome Jesus into your life and let Him clean you up. He came to clean us from the inside out.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. vv. 12-13

If we believe that Jesus is the true light sent by God, we become true children of God. We become spiritually born again. Our citizenship is transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. It's God's will that we receive Jesus and believe in his name, and believe Jesus is the *logos*, the true light. Because Jesus is the true light, we will never get lost if we follow Him.

A favorite Christmas card of mine said this, "The Word did not become a philosophy to be discussed, a theory to be debated, a concept to be pondered. The Word became a Person to be followed, enjoyed and loved."

In verse 14, John sums up the picture-perfect Christmas.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. v.14

The rational principle behind the universe, the source of all life, the executor of all divine activity came into our camp and pitched his tent among us.

John assures us with his choice of words that this grand miracle isn't something he was told about. He wants us to know that he and his fellow disciples were eyewitnesses. John wants us to know that Mary's child, the Man from Galilee, who he walked with, ate with, played with, and who had real flesh and blood is none other than the Maker of the Universe. The one who laughed so hard that the religious establishment accused him of being a drunk, and who got so tired and thirsty he has to ask a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, is the same one who

in the beginning made the first hydrogen and oxygen atoms to create water.

The picture-perfect Christmas is the celebration of a grand miracle that theologians call the incarnation. Incarnation means in fleshness. The picture-perfect Christmas is a celebration of the in fleshment of the Creator.

In the eighteenth century, Charles Wesley tried to explain it when he wrote, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." He wrote, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity. Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel."

Dr. Rachel Eckhardt from Berlin, Germany helps us understand the grand incarnation. She invented something called an "Aged Man Suit" to help her younger medical students empathize with their elderly patients. Dr. Eckhardt's Aged Man Suit has ear-protectors that stifle hearing, a yellow visor which blurs eyesight and makes it hard to distinguish colors, knee and elbow pads which stiffen the joints, and a Kevlar-style vest which presses uncomfortably against the chest. It's been custom-made to simulate the physical consequences of old age.

When Dr. Eckhardt straps the suit onto her med students, she tells them, "Welcome to Old age." Her Aged Man Suit turns young med students into temporarily slow, creaking AARP members. She hopes that her students gain an understanding of what it's like to be old. Her motive is to get younger doctors into geriatric medicine. I think our younger staff here at CPC should be forced to wear an Aged Man Suit for just a day to feel how those in the last third of their lives feel.

The Aged Man Suit is a good picture of what Jesus did when he lived among us. He put on a limited, flawed, and clunky human body so He could truly empathize with us. He experienced our pain and our limitation; he lived among us as one of us.

There is one more part to our story today. We know Jesus' friend, John, the fisherman, wrote what we read tonight. John wrote about another John. This other John, who is also known as John the Baptist came to announce and prepare people to receive the true light that was born on that picture-perfect Christmas.

As His new family, we bear witness to the true light

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. vv. 6-8

John the Baptist was a powerful preacher, and many people came out to hear him. Many people thought John was the true light. So, he had to remind the people that he wasn't the true light and that his purpose was to bear witness to the true light. And John did his job.

Like John the Baptist, we have also been called to bear witness to the true light. Listen to what another friend of Jesus named Peter says about us being witnesses to the true light.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

May the praises that we sing, the sights we see, the sounds we hear, and the words we read help us understand the picture-perfect Christmas. May we know the perfect ideas of Christmas like hope, peace, joy, and love are available to imperfect people like you and me.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail,
please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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