

**Christmas Day  
December 25, 2022**

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

Psalm 98

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Unlike its counterparts in Matthew and Luke, John's version of the Christmas story does not lend itself well to the pageantry of our Christmas Eve celebrations. John widens the scope of the mystery of Christmas, situating its meaning and significance in a cosmic context. And this rendering poses a challenge to any notion that Christmas can be contained within a single day – and, I would argue, pushes our imaginations to see the confines of our liturgical season burst at the seam with mystery, wonder, and joy. The mystery of Christmas invites us into far more than a feast or a season. The coming of God in the flesh invites us to reimagine life as a particular way of living – it challenges us to recognize that while the celebration of Christmas is limited to the twelve days, the work of Christmas carries on in the ordinary lives of those who recognize and receive the Christ-child, those who have been given the authority to become children of God.

The opening words of John's gospel turns the eyes of our imaginations back to the beginning, to the narratives of creation when God said, "Let there be..." and there was. The Word spoken by God existed before all things came into being because it was, as John tells us, with God in the beginning. More than that, though, the Word was itself God. And it is this Word which animates the entirety of life – every atom and particle, every rock and stone, every creature that breaths air, all of humankind – exists because this Word, this Creative Agent, is the foundation of all that is.

Those of us who've heard this story, who've listened to John's proclamation year in and year out, are prone to miss the shock factor of the opening verses in his gospel. He has taken great care to delineate the distinction between the pure and stable existence of God, and the frailty and dependence of all created things upon the creative agency of the Word. Then John drops a bombshell as he tells his readers that this very Word, who is the source of all life, *became human*, entering fully into the human condition and by doing so, revealed the glory of God to all whom God created. This is, in fact, the mission of the Word.

Theologians and philosophers throughout the ages have put pen to paper in attempts to dispel some of the mystery surrounding the Word. Many commentators focus on the first-century, Greek philosophical context that they assume undergirds the language John uses in the opening of his gospel. In that context, what we translate as "Word" is often understood as *reason* or *logic*. Its meaning evolved as it was adopted by Gnostic writers and philosophers who used it to denote a particular reason or logic that was reserved for those who had somehow gained access to divine wisdom and knowledge. And while there is certainly some legitimacy to this contextual analysis, the Hebrew tradition in which John was formed, a tradition with its own understanding of the Word, is equally significant for *our own* understanding. This particular Hebrew understanding makes a distinctive connection between the Word and *divine action*. The Word of God is not about intellectual property so much as it is about divine activity, particularly as it relates to creation, revelation, and deliverance.

The Word of God is not simply a personified utterance from a divine mouth. The Word creates, the Word offers life and light, the Word heals and delivers. The Hebrew Scriptures give an array of

illustrations of the Word's ministry – In Genesis 1 and Psalm 33, the Word is the active agent of creation; in Isaiah 7 and 38, the Word of the Lord comes to the prophet as a divine messenger. In Psalm 107, the Word of God is sent forth as an agent of healing and deliverance in response to the people's cry for help. The *action* of the divine Word is also guaranteed to deliver the results for which it was sent. In Isaiah 55:11, God says, "my Word that goes forth from my mouth shall not return empty...it shall accomplish that which I purpose...and will prosper in the things for which I sent it."

The ministry of the Word began long before the incarnation and its purpose has always been to reveal God to humankind, to teach us about God, to instruct us in what it means to live in right relationship with God and with each other, and to offer us healing in the context our brokenness. When God took on human flesh, when the Word came and dwelt among us, this ministry was embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus became the image of the invisible God. So, what does Jesus reveal to us about God?

Jesus reveals a God of compassion and mercy, embodied in Jesus' embrace of the outcasts and marginalized, his feeding of the hungry, and his tendency to share meals with those considered unclean and untouchable. Through his own suffering, he reveals a God who chooses to be "God with us" in the depths of our own suffering, refusing to leave us in the midst of our own despair. In Jesus we see that we – us and all of creation – stand in broken relationships that require healing and wholeness, healing and wholeness offered freely to all who receive Christ. This is the fullness of grace and truth embodied and revealed in Jesus. There is no limit to the supply of grace that God offers us; and God does not offer us this gift as if God were a cosmic Santa Claus making a list and checking it twice. The gift of grace that we are given *is* Jesus Christ, and he was given for the whole world that we might know who God is, and come to accept God through Jesus. In Christ we are reminded of how God chose to disclose God's self in flesh and blood so that we, who are flesh and blood, might recognize ourselves as children of God.

In all of this, Jesus reveals to us who the Father is, and he does more than that. For if we believe in Jesus' name, he gives us the *power* and *privilege* to become children of God. "Believing in Jesus' name" means more than simply believing that he is called by a particular name. It entails believing that Jesus is who he claims to be: the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One of God, the Son of God, who came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Believing in the name of Jesus means that we believe and trust in the *person of Jesus Christ*, in all that he stood for and worked for.

When Jesus gives us the *power* become children of God, we are given a new identity, not one marked by earthly categories of difference, but an identity that is marked by the love, compassion, and mercy that God reveals to us through Jesus. This new identity binds us not only to God, but to all whom God loves, enlisting us into the very ministry of the Word who became flesh and lived among us as Jesus Christ. When God chose to become human in Jesus Christ, God commended to us a way of life, calling us to emulate and actualize the incarnate life of God in Christ.

Our lives are meant to be living testimonies. Like John, who was sent from God as a witness to the Light, we are called to bear witness to God's love for us and God's desire to be with us. As children of God, we are not the light of the world – only Christ can be that light. *But we can and must testify to that light.* Everything about our lives – the way we behave, the way we relate to others, our patterns of spending and consumption, our work toward justice and peace – should reflect the gracious and merciful action of the God who chose to become one of us and to dwell among us. In all that we do, we are called to reflect the light that Christ brings into the world, the light that continues to shine even now

and that will never be overcome by the darkness of the world. Christmas is not just a season; Christmas is a way of life – Christmas is work, and it is a work into which we are all called.

Howard Thurman was an African-American author, educator, philosopher, theologian, and civil rights leader. He was a prominent religious leader during the civil rights era, influencing social justice movements and organizations. He is well known for his stance on radical non-violence, which influenced the major racial justice movements of his day. He mentored civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup> Thurman understood that Christmas was more than a holiday celebration *and* more than a season. In 1985, he published a collection of poetry called *The Mood of Christmas and other Celebrations*. One of those poems is called “The Work of Christmas,” and I’d like to share that with you in closing today:

*When the song of 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 the people,  
To make music in the heart.*

Christmas is a way of life, and we are called to live Christmas lives every day of the year.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard\\_Thurman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Thurman)