

A Sermon by the Reverend Crystal J. Hardin

Preached by Revd Timothy A R Cole

The First Sunday after Christmas  
Sunday, December 29, 2019

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 147

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

T.S. Eliot writes in “Dry Salvages” in his poem “Four Quartets.”

The moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts  
These are only hints and guesses  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

“The moment in and out of time.” Time is a funny thing. If you consult the internet and ask the question “What is Time?” you are confronted with a somewhat destabilizing discussion of space-time, multiverses, and theories on the fundamental nature of time, which are, to my mind at least, completely confusing.

At its simplest, time is what the clock says it is. At its most complex, it becomes the stuff of cosmic theories. At its most confusing, it is non-existent.

At least, according to Julian Barbour, a British physicist, whose claim, “is as simply stated as it is radical: there is no such thing.”<sup>1</sup>

And yet, we experience time. We have too little it. Too much of it. We are on borrowed time. We have plenty of time. There was that one time at band camp. You say that all that time. Where has the time gone? I am running out of time. It is time.

This Sunday seems particularly right for speaking about the complexity of time. I don't know about you, but Christmas, and Christmas festivities, really throw off my sense of time. Advent seemed particularly short this year. Christmas Eve seemed to last a week (and yet, it was still gone too soon). Some gatherings were over too quickly and some went on far too long. Family members, particularly the youngest among them, seemed to have grown faster than expected and I always imagine New Year is an age after Christmas when it is, of course, always only six days!

This week is a kind eddy in time. I find myself frequently asking, “What day is it (again)?”

In the midst of all this confusion about time, our Gospel proclaims a beginning. Not the baby lying in the manger, as you might expect, but one of the more cosmic variety.

*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*

In Advent and on Christmas Eve we considered the nativity. We meditated on the humility of Mary, the fragility of her body, and the power of her spirit in its resounding “Yes.” We joyfully anticipated the birth of our Lord almost as parents-to-be “nest” in anticipation of the arrival of their own baby. We raised our voices in song, proclaiming “Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuel.” We knelt at the Crib and joined our voices together in “Silent Night.” And, finally we sang **“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!”**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.popsci.com/science/article/2012-09/book-excerpt-there-no-such-thing-time>.

I have heard it said that if the nativity says what happened, the incarnation testifies to what it means. Let us take a moment then, before we move beyond the nativity and into the new calendar year, to consider what our reading from the Gospel of John has to say about the incarnation.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

What does it mean that the Eternal Word, the Word that was in the beginning with God, decisively and intentionally entered the human condition, entered into the material world, to dwell among us? What does it mean that the Word spoken at the beginning of the creating of the heavens and the earth became flesh, made itself proximate to us and to our condition?

It means, surely, that we are intimately connected to the Eternal. Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word, was knitted together cell by cell, like each one of us, within the womb. Was birthed fresh and new and tragically and gloriously alive from the body of a young woman.

In entering the world in this way, Jesus blessed fragility, powerlessness, and vulnerability. In entering the world this way, Jesus transformed us and redeemed us, challenging us, through holy proximity, to see each other, mere mortals, flawed and even broken, as we are, and yet, beloved by and part of God Eternal.

*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

William Shakespeare tells us that “the past is prologue,” setting the context for what is present. What then are these words, which are commonly referred to as the prologue of John’s Gospel, asking us to consider as context here and now?

Nothing short of the timeless meeting the temporal.

What you will read here has happened and yet it is also still happening because the incarnation is both in time and also beyond it.

Later, in the Gospel of John, when Jesus encounters the blind man, and spits on the earth, make muds with his saliva, smears it with his Holy hands onto the eyes of the man, he makes him see. This act, is an eternal act for he comes to open our eyes

also. When Jesus weeps at the grave of his friend, Lazarus. His tears are eternal tears. And, when he calls to Lazarus to “come out!” That call is an eternal call, meant for our ears also. These are moments that are “both in and out of time”, Eternal Words spoken in one time but heard in every time – See. Come out. Live.

*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And, from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.*

Wherever you find yourself in our reflection on time today, at a beginning, an end, or somewhere in between, take a moment to rest in the knowledge that in, Jesus Christ, God truly did, as T.S. Eliot so beautifully puts it, allow for grace dissolved in place.

For what is grace but those sometimes rare, always unbidden, and ultimately fleeting moments of transcendence – still points in the midst of our busy, scattered lives, where we connect to God and to whom we truly are. Where we, in our temporal lives, brush against something gloriously timeless.

So as the Christmas decorations come down, and guests leave, as party invitations stop arriving and school begins again – as our lives once again become more ordered and ordinary – let us hold fast to the truth of the incarnation: God descended in the form of a rather ordinary baby who, as Isaiah prophesied, “had no majestic bearing to catch our eye,” and yet who changed everything, and changes everything still. We are left, as W.H. Auden writes,

Remembering the stable where for once in our lives  
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.

As one theologian puts it: Our vocation in light of this is not to live a perpetual holiday. It is to be as ordinary as Jesus was, for our God loves the ordinary. This means the long labor of loving in the ways Jesus loved: seeing everyone as You and no one as an it.

Evermore and evermore.

Amen.

