

# Sermon

Christmas | John 1:1-14 | Peter Lane

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## I. Creation is Good.

Merry Christmas. What a joy to worship with you. To smell the evergreens. To hear Handel. To feel the closeness of family—of choice or of birth. God said this creation is very good. And we Episcopalians know how to appreciate it. The architecture of Jeanne Gang. The music of Bob Dylan. The dancing of Beyonce. Good food. Good wine. Good sex. Am I right? There is an old joke. I'm not sure it works anymore with how entirely permissive Baptists and Methodists have let themselves become, but here goes. A guy dies, goes to heaven, and gets a tour from an angel. First stop is a ballroom with thousands dancing. It's the baptists, the angel explains, they couldn't dance during their lives, so they do it in heaven. Next room is like a speakeasy, people bellied up to bars all around. Methodists, the angels says, Couldn't drink so... They go to the next room and folks are just sitting around doing nothing. The guy looks at his angel guide, huh? what's going on? There is nothing they could not do in their lives, so they just sit there. Episcopalians. God created the world very good and I'd like to think that we do as good a job of understanding that as any flavor of Christian.

## II. God made Godself vulnerable.

This Christmas, we would do well to contemplate the vulnerability that comes from loving creation so, a vulnerability that leads us through sorrow and joy. At Christmas, our model for that vulnerability is God. God loves the creation and God does not abandon it when it creaks and groans. Vulnerability means that God sticks with the creation, knowing that the same tectonic movements that formed the magnificent Rockies also caused the Haiti earthquake, knowing that the promise of a wedding can erode into divorce, knowing that a cold beer means fellowship to one and addiction to another. The pain comes with the joy. You see, God has no design on invulnerability. God is no castle in the sky with ramparts so high that none of our joy or suffering might ever slosh over to him. The opposite. God took the great risk of incarnation and came to live our vulnerable lives with us. That is love. It is an amazing idea. The divine, present in this? In Figgy pudding, whatever that is. In the smell of a hospice unit. Wendell Berry, put it this way:

    this meager sod,

    These stones, this low estate—  
    Is the household of God.

    And it is heaven's gate. (Given, 138 as quoted in Peters 321)

Loving is a vulnerable enterprise. God can be our model and our motivation.

## III. The Gospel of John's Risk-taking God.

We read the gospel of John tonight. I know, it doesn't have the swaddled baby or handsome shepherds or melodious Angels. We'll be back to Luke next year. But the Gospel of John. Come on. It gives us a risk-taking God. Let me just read for you the first and the final verse of our reading.

    In the beginning was the Word  
    and the Word was with God  
    and the Word was God...

    And the Word came and dwelt among us.

"In the beginning was the Word." Our Christmas story is a creation story.

"The Word was with God." God is relational. God desires. All of us who have risked relationship know that there is no relationship without desire and no desire without vulnerability.

"The Word was God." The divine relationship is one of equals.

"The Word came and dwelt among us." God became incarnate, became human. He sang and he sweated.

John speaks about a God who creates, a God who desires relationship, a God who desires us and is willing to risk vulnerability to be with us. The divine is here.

## IV. We should love the world.

I don't mean that God is just here in this church on this Silent and Holy Night. God is present on the loud raucous ones too. The Church has too often segregated God off into the places we want to think of as Silent and Holy. One of my favorite characters, Jayber Crow, the town barber of fictional Port William, ponders, in the Wendell Berry novel of the same name, the disconnect between how people live and what they hear in church. Jayber sees people who love "good crops good gardens, good livestock..." sitting

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through 'world-condemning sermons'; Jayber hears 'the wickedness of the flesh...preached from the pulpit' while 'young husbands and wives and courting couples' sit 'thigh to thigh, full of yearning and joy'; Jayber puzzles over a religion that scorns 'the beauty and goodness of this world'" (Berry, as quoted in Peters, 317). And so Jayber asks, "[Did] Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it?" No. No. No. We should not despise our flesh. We should love the world and the flesh. He was not naive. And Jayber was familiar with life's vulnerabilities. He grew up an orphan, watches the marriage of his friend fall apart. His hair is receding. He understood why people are drawn to invulnerability and those people and ideas that promise it.

Invulnerability sounds tempting right now, this Christmas when we are so aware of the contingent nature of our lives. A truck crashing through a Christmas Market in Berlin. 726 murders in Chicago. It is no wonder so many in the world are enthralled with politicians who promise invulnerability. *We'll make so many nukes that...* Our human desire to seek invulnerability helps me understand our policies of mass incarceration. A desire for invulnerability softly condones acting on our biases against Muslims or Mexicans. In the face of all that, I can see why we might want to project bravado and domesticate our religion into the Silent and Holy places. But that is not what is on offer. That is not loving creation—it is stifling it. As Christian Wiman puts it, the incarnation "is an intrusion of God into reality, into the contingent nature of our lives." The incarnation intrudes into our lives with love.

#### **V. The antidote to invulnerability is knowing ourselves as desired.**

Fear leads us to want invulnerability. Love drives out fear. The antidote to invulnerability is knowing ourselves to be desired. That is one of the things Christmas is about. Christmas is about God desiring us, loving us, spending time with us, celebrating with us, suffering with us, dying with us. To celebrate Christmas is to celebrate being desired and in turn desiring. That is the prologue to John. God desires to be in relationship with Jesus. The incarnation is God desiring to be in relationship with us. As Rowan Williams has written, "We are occasions of joy!" Imagine that. God desires you. The way to love God back is to desire others, to see

other people in significant ways, to be in relationship with the world. Believing in the incarnation is a "dangerous acknowledgement that my joy depends on someone else's as theirs does on mine" (R. Williams). But that opens us up to full, abundant, blessed life.

This Christmas, let's risk a vulnerability that will lead us through sorrow and joy. God did. God's love will not deliver us from this earth, but actually more deeply into it. Since Wendell Berry is my muse for this sermon. I give him the last word, a few lines from his poem *Handing Down*. Two men sit on a porch, the younger describing the older. Berry now,

The world has finally worn him  
until he's no longer strange to it  
His face has grown comfortable on him...

Among the greens of full summer,  
among shadows like monuments,  
he makes his way down.

loving the earth he will become.

AMEN.

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