

Year C Second Sunday after Christmas John 1:1-18

John brings us on a journey that leads us into the joy-filled, eternal, swirling dance of divine love. God is love. John's earnest desire is to reveal to us, to help us understand, that the never-ending, constant flow of love uniting Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has come to earth. Love has come to earth, born a baby in Bethlehem, so that we, too, can join in this incredible dance of divine love. We have become participants in this cosmic love story of God and the world and every human in it (phrasing borrowed from Meda Stamper, workingpreacher.org). We are going to dive a little deeper into what John is describing for us and we're going to reflect on why all of it has meaning for us in our lives.

John moves us today from the Word that has always existed, the Word who created all things, and plunks us down into the time when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in this world – a world that did not know its own true Light. The “world” – *kosmos* – is a very important concept for John and for us. In all of the other three gospels combined, the word “kosmos” occurs 15 times. In John's gospel, we hear “kosmos” 78 times...78 times. The world for John means the ordered systems and institutions operating in opposition to God's purpose and to the people who are participating – knowingly and unknowingly – in those broken systems. The world for John is what we have added onto God's good creation.

In John's gospel we hear of God's love for the world (3:16) despite the fact that much of the world is a place of corruption, persecution, hatred (15:19, 16:33) and does not know its own Creator. God is determined to save this world, to save us from ourselves. God made flesh came to do exactly that – to make good on the promise God had made from the very beginning. Throughout Scripture, we hear

this promised expressed in words like “ransom”, “redeem”, and “gather in”.

Jeremiah declares to us, God “will gather [Israel] and will keep him as a shepherd does a flock. For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him” (Jer.31:10-11). In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians we hear that “[God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, ...as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph.1:9-10). This gathering, this redemption, ransoming, rescue – this must be “from” something...We are rescued, ransomed from something and God tells us, through Jeremiah, that we are being rescued “from hands too strong for us.” From hands too strong for us...What does that mean?

John explains to us throughout his gospel, that the hands too strong for us are the hands of the world – the hands of the broken systems and institutions that now surround us and dictate nearly every aspect of our lives. Have you seen the insurance company commercials on the tv that tell us the world cannot function without insurance? There’s one commercial that plays during hockey games and it says that, without insurance, this game would not be possible, and it shows us the image of an empty arena – no players on the ice, no fans in the stands. There’s another one that tells us that all of the world’s finances would grind to a halt without insurance and they show us the image of empty highways, not one single truck delivering goods, airplanes parked on the runways, trains in the station going nowhere. These commercials really bug me – “the world can’t function without insurance” – because I always think to myself, “Well of course not.” Who told us that the world can’t function without insurance? The insurance companies told us that the world can’t function without insurance. You can’t own a home if you don’t have insurance. You can’t drive a car if you don’t have insurance. We

cannot even operate as God's Church if we don't have insurance. Those police record checks that church leadership must have done every few years – that's because the insurance company tells us that we must do them. And it's not entirely the insurance companies' fault. They are just one example. They exist because of the way we think, because of the way we operate in the world. We are ruled by the world's idea of power – property, position, and pocketbook. So many people want more at the expense of others. More is better. Bigger is better. This way of thinking and being has gotten away from us – it's bigger than all of us and now we don't know how to stop it. Can you imagine having a day each week when nobody worked? When not one single person in Canada went out to work or worked from home? No? If you think to yourself "that's not possible", why is it not possible? Is the first thing that comes into your mind the economy? The world grinding to a halt for a day sounds impossible, it sounds like it would be a disaster. Billions of dollars lost. Well, that is the world that we have created, not God. We are totally tangled up in that world and we cannot imagine that it could be any different. In fact, we think parts of it are okay. Slaves learning how to read and write does not make slavery okay. We receive a lot of benefits from the way the world works but it does not make it okay.

The good news is that what is impossible for us alone, what we cannot even imagine being able to fix, will be mended by God. We cannot imagine all of our institutions and corporations and governments completely free of all corruption and greed, free of all brokenness. We cannot imagine all people completely free of all corruption and greed, free of all brokenness. But that is God's plan. God has already accomplished this and is drawing all things toward this perfect wholeness. And we have signed on to help.

Enter Jesus – the Word made flesh. When someone says, “I give you my word,” they are promising they will do what they have told you they will do. And, in Jesus, God gave us his Word. God’s promise that we find throughout all of scripture is that God will mend the brokenness of this world, God will give us his kingdom on earth as in heaven. That is exactly what we find in Jesus – the healing wholeness of God’s love, the perfection of God’s kingdom. “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” John assures us. Jesus is fully God and therefore is able to give us God’s grace. Grace means favour and kindness and it is limitless...grace upon grace, a constant and steady supply of God’s loving kindness flowing into us. Grace and truth came through Jesus, we are told. Truth here means more than just speaking things that are true. Many things are truthful but the truth has its source in God. God is Truth.

God’s kindness and truth, overflowing from Jesus’ fullness, are our strength and our help. The law given through Moses was a guide for our behaviour that could be followed or not. Laws don’t change hearts and minds. In Jeremiah, God tells us that he is going to write his law on our hearts. We won’t be taught about God any longer – we will simply know God. God will be within us and that is what Jesus accomplished for us. God dwells within us because Jesus gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit. God dwelling within us pulls us into relationship with God, into the flow of divine love that I mentioned at the beginning. We are able to enter more fully and deeply into this relationship through worship and prayer. We are being gradually transformed into the wholeness God intends.

But we are also meant to do something with this amazing gift. The interesting thing about the word “grace” in John’s gospel is that he only uses it four times and

you've heard all four of those times today. At the beginning of his gospel, John explains to us God's plan for us, tells us we find God's outpouring of kindness in Jesus, who is God, and then, through the rest of his gospel he doesn't speak of God's grace. He shows us God's grace. In Jesus we see what God's grace looks like, what it feels like, what it says, and what it does...It heals, it welcomes, it forgives, it gives in abundance, it loves everyone. This is what God does and Jesus had made God known to us. We can't unsee that. We can't unknow that.

Jesus, in the loving arms of God, with his head resting on his chest, right next to his heart, has made God known to us and has brought us into that tender, loving embrace as well – we rest in God's bosom. And Jesus tells us, "As my Father sent me, so now I send you" (20:21). As the Church, we always gather to be sent. We are sent into the world to be God's grace in the world, as Jesus was, and to gather the world into the loving embrace of God.

According to Mother Teresa, "The sisters care for about forty-nine thousand lepers. They are among the most unwanted, unloved, and neglected people. The other day," she writes, "one of our sisters was washing a leper covered with sores. A Muslim holy man was present, standing close to her. He said, 'All these years I have believed that Jesus Christ is a prophet. Today I believe that Jesus Christ is God since he has been able to give such joy to this sister, so that she can do her work with so much love.'" (p.23 of *Mother Teresa Her Essential Wisdom*).

"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 overtake it." Let us, who are close to the Father's heart, shine his light in the darkness and let us make him known.