

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Christmas I; John 1:1-18

Some of my favorite summer memories come from my family's annual trip to the beach. During my younger years, it was our tradition to vacation at Pawley's Island in South Carolina. I haven't been there in decades, but while I understand the mainland side of Pawley's has become more developed, the on-island landscape hasn't changed much.

Pawley's is a very small island – less than four miles long with most of the island only one house wide. In the 70's and early '80's, once you crossed over the bridge from the mainland, pretty much all you would see were beach cottages on a sleepy, quiet, and narrow strip of land. The only grocery store to be found then was a small Red & White back on the mainland. The beaches were clean, expansive, and un-crowded. I remember summer days when if there was another person within 100 yards, the beach was crowded.

So, at night, it was dark, and I mean *dark*. As there were very few streetlights on the island, no commercial district to speak of, and the cottages were set apart from each other; light pollution was not an issue. When you sat up on one of the dunes or in a rocking chair on your beach-front porch gazing up at the night sky, it seemed like you could see all the stars. Sometimes, it seemed like you could see forever into the galaxy.

One night, I was sitting by myself on a sand dune in the dark. Staring into the star-filled night sky, I was mesmerized by the expansive enormity of it. I remember thinking about all those stars, trying to comprehend how far away they must be from me – how far away they must be from each other. I puzzled about how there must be a beginning and an end to it all, but how could there be? And, if there was an end, then what was there on the other side?

As I contemplated, it felt as though I was being absorbed by the night sky. It was so big, so much, and I was so small and inconsequential in relation to it. My immediate reality of the sand, water, wind, and sea grass that was around me started to seem unreal and I remember feeling this scary sense that I was *falling upward* into this vast expanse of the heavens.

I became so uncomfortable, that I had to pull back and shake my head to clear my mind and return from this cosmic contemplation to the more mundane and tangible existence here in this body on this beach and rejoin my family inside. It was a lot of truth to take in...

This is a bit like how I've felt moving from Luke's detailed time- and space-bound account of the birth story of Jesus to John's cosmic saga today of the eternal Word through whom all of creation came into being. Luke's story is situated in a very specific location – Bethlehem within the Roman Empire – and time – during the reign of Emperor Augustus – while John sets the salvific work of God in Christ within the cosmic context of creation.

These are radical shifts in perspective. It makes me a bit dizzy and disoriented – like watching a movie where the vantage point starts on a very specific human-level tableau and then pans out and out and out and keeps panning out until all is lost within the enormity of the cosmos. Then, too, I feel a need to return to our earthly here and now – to *this* particularity. The radical change in perspective shocks me into a new way of thinking and seeing life and my place within it. But, I can only stay there so long before it gets too uncomfortable, and I must shake my head and return to a reality that I can touch and feel.

John's gospel begins with this beautiful prologue that we heard a few minutes ago, that sets the entire story of creation, and God's work through Christ within his creation, in a cosmic context. This is John's Christmas story, minus the manger, Mary and Joseph, angels singing, shepherds adoring, or even the baby Jesus for that matter. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was

with God, and the Word was God.” You can tell from this very first sentence that John’s Jesus is painted with bigger brushstrokes, and that this “beginning” of the story of Jesus starts well before Luke’s nativity account.

In 18 short verses, John’s prologue summarizes the entire story of Jesus. And in it, John writes of God as the eternal Word coming to dwell with his own creation and of their rejection of him. And it promises power to be children of God and grace upon grace for those who receive and believe.

I believe we need both of these perspectives – both the cosmic and eternal Word that is of God and was with God from the beginning and the fleshy Jesus, born of an unmarried young woman in a desperate and difficult time in human history. I believe we need both the spiritualized self-expression of God through whom all things were made and the defenseless human baby, whose birth brought shepherds to witness and adore. The truth that the story of Jesus points to is a paradox – a paradox that, if we wish to understand it, requires us to embrace both of these stories. It is through the difficult and somewhat disorienting work of holding these two perspectives together that we gain a fuller picture of what has happened and why God’s act in Christ through the incarnation of Jesus is important.

If we leave ourselves with only one of these perspectives, we are left with something incomplete. If we only treasure the fleshy and human-scale account of the nativity story, then we may be tempted into a diminished understanding of God – and which may lead to worshipping God made in our image. If we grasp only the immensely transcendent and wholly-other cosmic-scale account of the eternal Word of God, then we may be tempted into an understanding of God that is so distant that we lose any sense of intimacy with a God who knows and loves us. *We need both the particularity of Jesus and the enormity of God’s eternal Word.*

This Christmas season, we rejoice not only in the birth of the baby Jesus, our Savior and Messiah born on a specific day, in a specific city, to specific people. We rejoice also in the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, through whom all things came into being; God’s own self-expression who has descended to Earth, taken on flesh, and come among his creation to give us the power to become children of God, and to give us life, light, grace, and truth. Thanks be to God!

So, let us do this difficult work of holding both of these perspectives together as we continue our journey through this Christmas season and the eternal mystery of the incarnation. Let us bear both of these perspectives of God’s work in Christ – the earthly and the cosmic – by keeping our feet in the sand and our faces in the wind while we gaze into the night sky and lose ourselves in the wonders of the cosmos.

Amen.