

January 2, 2022
“In the Flesh”
Sirach 24:1-9 / John 1:1-9, 14
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

I used to get into making New Year’s resolutions when I was a kid, but to be honest, I can’t even remember the last time I bothered. Too many disappointingly, predictably unfulfilled resolutions, I suppose? You know what I’m taking about.

When I did bother, they mostly fell into the usual categories. Often incredibly specific goals meant to improve myself in one way or another. To make myself better. Again, you know what I’m talking about.

I’ve also had a couple of tapes playing in my head for a long time, and I KNOW YOU KNOW what I mean about the tapes that play and repeat, over and over again, in our heads. Amen?! Some of those tapes, for me, often fueled my resolutions.

I can tell you that one of my tapes is that I’m not a particularly interesting person. Another is that I’m not an expert at anything, with the tape’s skewed emphasis – in my mind anyway – that experts are necessarily more interesting. I’ve always wanted to be an expert. I’ve always admired and elevated people who seem to be experts at one thing or another, who know how to do one thing or another really well, or know a lot about one thing or another.

So I can recall resolutions focused – not even consciously at the time – on making myself both more interesting and more of an expert at something. Committing, for example, to read everything I could about a particular topic – say the civil rights movement. Out of genuine interest, for sure, but also at some level so I could wow people with my vast knowledge!

Or as another example, committing to practice guitar at least 30 minutes a day to finally go beyond the basic level I’ve been since I first learned to play in high school. To become an accomplished guitar player and not just someone who plays the guitar.

Those tapes still operate, of course, but I’d like to think less so as I’ve gotten older. The truth is, I’m a generalist, and I’m learning to love that about myself!

More recently I've taken to a mantra from Meister Eckhart, to "be willing to be a BEGINNER ever single morning." To not take myself so damn seriously. To be more graceful toward myself, and so toward others. To stop trying to PROVE myself and my worth, to move beyond the need to PROVE myself and my worth all the time.

And MOST IMPORTANTLY, to operate as much as possible from a space of abundance rather than a space of deficit. I think that's the real reason I stopped bothering with New Year's resolutions, because they mostly seemed, quite frankly, to grow out of a pretty shitty view of myself. And that is a recipe for perpetual disappointment.

It can be important, of course, at times, to push and challenge ourselves, but with the relative wisdom of age has come for me a more concerted effort to focus my limited energy on learning to love myself more fully and consistently. And so learning to love those around me, and the world around me, more fully and consistently. I'm trying anyway.

I feel like Jesus said something about that.

You know that South African Archbishop and anti-Apartheid activist and freedom fighter Desmond Tutu died last week, the news of which came out just before worship last Sunday.

Thanks be to God for his life and legacy, marked by an abiding commitment to love – lifting up and living out a deep sense of interconnectedness and shared humanity, trying to figure out and practice what it meant to love even his enemies. As he said many times, the world will not change if we love only those who love us.

I think I've shared before at Calvary that Amy had the opportunity to take a class with him when she was in seminary.

Among other memories, she recalls him telling their aspiring group of preachers that the only sermon you ever have to preach is that God loves you. But that you have to keep preaching it, over and over again, in different ways, because we don't believe it. We

don't believe that God loves us, and we don't believe that God loves all of us equally. We don't believe, deep down, that we are – EACH of us and ALL of us – beloved.

The gospel in one word is LOVE! Period. God loves you and God's love is baked into you, into your being, embodied as it was and is in the fullness and wonder and beauty of all creation.

It is that divine love that connects us to each other, and has connected from the beginning. That's straight-up Desmond Tutu. And that's straight-up Jesus.

This coming week marks our liturgical shift from the 12 days of Christmas to Epiphany, beginning January 6, when we recall the visit of the Magi to the Christ child and further celebrate the revelation of Jesus as God incarnate.

God among us, God's love among us, embodied, in human form, IN THE FLESH. The manifestation, the appearance of Jesus as both a mirror to our shared humanity and a window to our shared divinity.

Next Sunday, liturgically speaking, the church traditionally focuses on the story of Jesus' baptism, a different kind of epiphany if you will, when God's Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove and a heavenly voice cries out, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." The revelation of Jesus as God's beloved, ultimately pointing – as Jesus did through his life and his death – to OUR belovedness. To OUR identities, made as we all are in the image of God, *Imago Dei*, as God's beloved.

THAT, that is the space from which we need to start our new years. And each new day, for that matter.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That's our reading from the gospel of John, as Carl just read for us. "In the beginning was the *Logos*," to use the original Greek, "and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God."

In the beginning. IN THE BEGINNING.

You'll recall, perhaps, that the opening book of the Bible as we know it, the opening book of Hebrew scripture, the book of Genesis, starts with this same phrase, "IN THE BEGINNING, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

The use of this same phrase by the author of John's gospel is no accident, of course. Meant to connect this first section of the gospel, known as the prologue (officially through verse 18, beyond our reading), with the dramatic story of creation. And again, we note that John's gospel does not including any detail about Jesus' birth.

Like the creation story, it begins as pure poetry - and most scholars believe that portions of John's prologue were actually taken from an early Christian hymn influenced by both Greek and Jewish philosophy.

Logos is the root, of course, of English words like "logic" and "logical," and the suffix of words like "biology" and "theology." In the Greek, logos conveys knowledge, wisdom, reason, revelation. Scholars point out that the group of early Greek philosophers known as "Stoics" understood logos as the very mind and heart of God that permeated all of creation that was, if you will, baked into it.

The "logic" of God that set the world as we know it in motion.

In that same vein, our reading from the book of Sirach describes wisdom present at creation. God's wisdom, notably personified as a female character.

Sirach, otherwise known as the "Book of Ben Sira" to indicate its authorship, or "Ecclesiasticus," may not be familiar to you because it's not included in our Protestant biblical canon. But it is included in other traditions – among the so-called "Deuterocanonical" books that existed only in Greek language manuscripts written by Jews living in Greek-speaking regions.

Hear again these words: "I (that is, Wisdom) came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne

was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway. . . . Before the ages, in the beginning, (God) created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be." IN THE BEGINNING.

And again from John's gospel: "(The Word) was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through (the Word), and without (the Word) not one thing came into being. What has come into being in (the Word) was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Hear the echoes from Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness."

For the author of John's gospel, the Logos present at creation, from the very beginning, is manifested, revealed, embodied in the life and light of Jesus. Verse 14: "And the Word, the Logos, became flesh and lived among us, . . ."

The God in whom "we live and move and have our being" is intimately made known to us in human form. In the flesh. In the person of Jesus.

This text from John's gospel gives rise to the theological notion of the "Trinity" – the one God of monotheism expressed in three different forms, as Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Three in one, one in three – within which, again, we experience Jesus as both human and divine, as mirror to humanity and window to divinity.

It's a theological claim long and hotly debated within and beyond Christian tradition, but at the end of the day, what we can take away is the profound truth that RELATIONSHIP is fundamental to the divine identity. And so to our identities. We are made for loving relationship, with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors – including those we consider enemies.

Kathleen Norris describes the Trinity as "the primary symbol of a community that holds together by containing diversity within itself." The divine love that connects God to

Jesus to Spirit, is the same love that's baked into all of us, the belovedness that connects us to each other and to the rest of creation. As it has from the very beginning.

With that understanding we literally, LITERALLY, carry in us what was present at creation. Kathleen Norris shares three different quotes with that in mind:

The first from the late writer, scientist and ecologist Rachel Carson: ". . . each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium and calcium are combined in the same proportions as sea water."

From the late Welsh poet Dylan Thomas: "The force that drives the water through the rocks / drives my red blood."

And finally from Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé tribe: ". . . all things are connected, like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth."

All things are connected, and have been from the very beginning. Connected by the stamp of divine belovedness, love built into the fabric of each of us and calling us to relate to each other out of that belovedness. To see and honor, NAMASTE, the divine belovedness in each other.

During the season of Christmas and into the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the birth of Jesus – in whom that love took on human form; the Word, the Logos, made flesh to live among us. Jesus who came and lived and died, even, to make known the divine love that was already present, that has been present from the beginning of creation. From all of our beginnings.

And during the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, we also remember and celebrate that same Jesus who calls US to make the Word flesh, to make the heart and mind and love of God real, NOT theoretically but incarnationally. In ourselves. In our relationships with each other. In the world.

You may have learned different ways of understanding the Trinity if you grew up in the church. Ways to try to wrap your head around it. Kathleen Norris shares a metaphor

from Tertullian, the mid-2nd and into early-3rd century Christian author and theologian – known as “the father of Western theology” and famous for being the first writer in Latin to use the term “trinitas.” Trinity.

He described the Trinity as a plant, with God as the deep root, Jesus as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and sustenance.

Within the embrace of divine interconnectedness, friends, may we see and feel and claim, deep down, IN THE FLESH, our rootedness as God's beloved.

May we, like Jesus, have the courage and tenacity and faithfulness to break forth into the world out of that same belovedness. To learn to love, IN THE FLESH, ourselves and each other more fully and consistently.

And filled with the God's Spirit, may we be among those who spread beauty and sustenance. Light in the midst of the darkness. IN THE FLESH.

May it be so.