



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
Christmas Eve 2021
Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver

Just recently I read an article in *The New York Times* written by David Brooks. He gave the article the title *What do you Say to the Sufferer?*¹ and this is how it began: “Several weeks ago, I gave a talk, and afterward the questions from the audience came to me on index cards. Most of the questions were about politics or society, but one card read: ‘What do you do when you’ve spent your life wanting to be dead?’”

He went on to write, “I didn’t answer that card because I didn’t know anything about the person who wrote it, and because I didn’t know what to say. But it has haunted me and I’ve kept the card on my night stand ever since.”

That was how his article began and I have now let that be the beginning of this sermon. And on one level I am sorry to begin a sermon on Christmas Eve with such a heavy image. Christmas Eve, perhaps, is supposed to be light and airy, hot chocolate and marshmallows, warm and cozy, joyous and gentle... but this article seemed anything but this. It was more uncomfortable and concerning; more jarring and disturbing. And yet it cut very quickly into the heart of life and I would also say very much into the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For just as David Brooks put that index card on his nightstand and let it enter into his thinking, praying and contemplating, it might just get us thinking a little more carefully about those things that a pandemic has encouraged so many of us to ponder. What is the purpose of life and suffering and hope and faith and how does it shape how I live my life and have my being? What is the most central part of who I am, where I need to

¹ *What do you Say to the Sufferer?* by David Brooks in *The New York Times* December 9, 2021

know deep love, compassion, acceptance, and trust? What are those parts of life, of ourselves, that many of us don't want to delve into on most days but perhaps even more so on Christmas Eve? But maybe we really should, at least just for a little while, for our lives are never only filled with gingerbread and sugar plums.

You may have noticed that the gospel reading for tonight was the first portion of the Gospel of St. John. We heard this gospel's version of the birth narrative of Jesus Christ, and it is very different from the gospels of Luke and Matthew. If you know your Bible just a little bit, you will know that especially Luke's gospel gets into much more of the scene of how Jesus was born. Images of Bethlehem, shepherds, angels, manger and a mother who treasured all these things in her heart. But the gospel of John does not focus in on the images we know well from Sunday School pageants over many a year; pageants with bathrobes, wayward sheep and shy angels. The gospel of John is much more interested in the theology, the Christology, the understanding of why Jesus Christ came to us. And it moves much more deeply into our purpose and our possibilities as human beings. It does so with such beautiful prose and poetry, which was recognized as a hymn of the beginning church. A hymn of such impossible beauty and soul mesmerizing connection that it is often left unanalyzed and free so that it might just stand on its own as some of the most holy words ever stitched together.

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.

This is no ordinary statement, or descriptor of the coming of the Christ or a Christmas Card slogan. This is about how we understand God and how God intersects and interacts with us and this world. It ties together the relationship of the holy and our lives, God and the incarnation, the presence in our lives of the One who formed us and shaped us from the very start of time and even before that. In the beginning was the Word, this was no hesitant word whispered into the cosmos but the Logos, the wisdom of God, Sophia, shown to us in Jesus the Christ. The very heart of God was known in this Word, this true wisdom of God's grace and eternal love.

In the beginning, of course, echoes the first words of the book of Genesis for they are the very same. The Hebrew Bible commences with, "in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." In both cases a reference to the very start of all that is, known and unknown. This is the version of the Big Bang Theory according to Genesis and to John. This attests to the very start of all that is in a big explosion, a start of the formation of this universe which has continued to expand ever since. In that theory, "Around 13.7 billion years ago, everything in the entire universe was condensed in an infinitesimally small singularity, a point of infinite denseness and heat." This was the beginning point, the starting point, the beginning of time and from there this universe in which we live has expanded in ways so that our limited minds and thoughts can barely keep up.

But curiously there is an alternative theory which goes a bit like this: the universe has always existed but there has simply been different phases of expansion and contraction, of death and life, of beginning and end, of alpha and omega. I am not sure how that sits with you but it seems relevant on this night as we explore God's relationship with us in all time. For it too suggests that existence has been eternal, no beginning or end, much like our understanding of who God is. To me this theory suggests that all is eternal, that God has been with us since the beginning of time and even before that. That the Christ who came to live amongst us, revealed the infinite entering into time, entering into our understandings, entering into our deep despair of who we are and what we are called to be. The God of eternity, of the beginning or simply the eternal was entering into our dilemmas, our doubts, our fears, and also our hopes and possibilities. The wisdom of God, the Word of God was entering all that is known to us. This is what we celebrate on this holy night.

Let me come back to that David Brooks article that I quoted at the start. The one that was not about the warm fuzzies of Christmas but the rather poignant question of what one should do with those questions of purpose or meaning or even how to continue.

David Brooks offered this: "There is always a lot of suffering in this world, and over the past few years we have seen high tides of despair. The sources of people's pain may be different – grief, shame, exclusion, heartbreak, physical or mental health issues—but they almost always involve some feeling of isolation, of being cut off from others.

"In my own seasons of suffering, I've been shocked at how emotional pain feels like searing physical pain in the stomach and chest, by how tempting it is to self-isolate and rob yourself of the very human contact you need most."

David Brooks went on to say, "Rabbi Elliot Kukla once described a woman with a brain injury who would sometime fall to the floor. People around her would rush to immediately get her back on her feet, before she was quite ready. She told Kukla, 'I think people rush to help me up because they are so uncomfortable with seeing an adult lying on the floor. But what I really need is for someone to get down on the ground with me.'"

This is what tonight is all about. This is what that beginning described so long ago was all about. God coming to us, to get down on the ground with us. Revealing that we do not walk alone. That even in our deepest despair we are known, we are held, that there is one who gets on the ground with us. That there is one amongst us who will enter with us all that we will ever encounter. That there is one who understands the depths and the heights of life.

Joan Chittister writes this: "It is this consciousness of the gift of life, of God's greatness and the sense of the divine in our midst, that brings depth to our own life. It is those things that make the celebration of Christmas more than a mere commemoration of an historical birth date. We do not come to Christmas to pretend that the baby Jesus is born again this day. Nor do we pretend that on this day the baby Jesus is born in some

mystical way in us. We come to Christmas looking for the signs of Jesus' presence manifested in our own life and age, in us and in the world around us."²

In this time of pandemic many have felt bereft or overwhelmed or unsure where to find hope. May this holy night be a sign that in the beginning was the Word, the Logos, the Wisdom of God, the true light which enlightens everyone, and was coming into the world; to be seen and known and loved amongst, around and within us.

² Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville Tennessee, 2009), page 80