

Christmas 1 2024
Church of the Messiah, Gwynedd
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I love to sing in the car. I will put on full concerts, utterly unphased by those who might be sitting at the stop light next to me. Everything from show tunes to sacred music, songs from my high school days to current billboard chart toppers. I do it all!

Everyone has unique areas of interest. While scrolling social media or Google searching, I find myself deep down the rabbit hole of late-night host James Corden and his famed Carpool Karaoke videos. Have you seen any of these?

If you are unfamiliar, James is shown in his car tooling around the streets of NYC, and much to his "surprise," he spots a star on the street who hops in, and they sing with great gusto together. Honestly, I could watch those videos for hours (if I had the time).

A few months ago, a friend texted me a picture without commentary. I was sitting in the middle of a reasonably serious meeting but couldn't contain my chuckles. It was an image of four people sitting in a car together, reminiscent of my favorite online videos. Over their heads were their names - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What made it so funny was Matthew, Mark, Luke were just dressed in regular street clothing, but then, sitting in the passenger seat, was John, dressed in full Las Vegas showgirl gear. Feathered headdress and all. To say that John's gospel differs from the others is an understatement.

With John, there is no baby Jesus. There are no real parables (The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a pearl, etc...). The stories of Jesus detailed in the Gospel of John are different

from those written in the other three (known as the synoptic Gospels... Synoptic, meaning "seen together"). Those three gospels focus on the humanity of Jesus, while John focuses more on the divinity of the person who has come with a particular role - to redeem us.

That is why reading the most well-known part of John this morning feels like a little bit of theological whiplash. We are still in the middle of the reminders of the "unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given" vibe of Christmas Eve.

What does John's Gospel give us? An intensely personal account. It is passionate and poetic, drawing on abstract concepts. You would not be able to create a timeline of Jesus' life from his gospel, but there is an unmistakable quality to what it seeks to communicate. The presence of Jesus, the word made flesh, has changed everything.

Jesus isn't just something or someone God cooked up when God noticed things were going off the rails for us as humans. Jesus wasn't an emergency plan for a broken world. Jesus, the Word, was God and was with God from the very beginning of time.

When picking the music for my ordination, I always knew what the opening hymn would be - "I bind unto myself today, the strong name of the Trinity," also known as St. Patrick's Breastplate. I must admit that a few of my close friends gagged a little at that choice because (according to them) it is "old school" or "sounds like a dirge if played too slowly." Frankly, parts of me are intentionally old school when it comes to God because there is a need to hold the balance between our understanding and the voices of the theologians who have come before us. None of us can know everything about God on our own. If we think we have, then we have made God out to be too small.

I picked this hymn because it hammers home the concept that I was binding myself to God, the ultimate holy mystery. That is the work for all of us. Because of this holy mystery, it is natural to try to break down the parts of God into more understandable aspects. God, as Creator. Jesus, as Redeemer. Holy Spirit, as Friend. Theologians would call this “modalism,” breaking God down into the activities of God. And guess what? It’s considered heresy, by the way. God’s qualities are not a relay race of activity, one part of God passing the torch to the next when we need it. God, all at once, is creator, redeemer, and friend. That has always been true, and it will continue to be true forever.

By the way, voices over time have made the word “heresy” out to be far worse than it is. Heresy can mean “in opposition to the commonly held understanding of church teaching,” but it can also be seen as “not having a full understanding yet”. Maybe there is something good, holy, and right about sitting in the middle of our desire to work out our unfinished or incomplete understanding of God. Our theological knowledge is a lifelong journey of seeking. May we never find ourselves at the end of it.

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was WITH God, and the Word WAS God.’ This might be the sentence that makes the most sense ... and yet it is so far beyond my understanding that all I can do... all that WE can do... is sit in awe of its power.

In John’s powerfully poetic way, he fits all the other gospels inside his first chapter using the images of “Light” and “Word” as if all the earthy Jesus details are secondary to ultimate truth - there is no darkness that can overcome the unending God-light that shines through it all. The God-light that shines through US all.

In the middle of St. Patrick's Breastplate, the hymn takes a surprising left turn musically and theologically. Its measured verses give way to a joyful, lilting bridge that almost tempts one to dance. It reads:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Christmas is a little like that musical left turn. The life of Jesus in our midst sounds different from our experience of living. The hymn calls us to wear Jesus like a breastplate of protection. I would suggest that the hymn invites us to wrap ourselves in what we already know - God's vision for beauty and life has always included us.

We are not an afterthought because God was lonely or God needed to show God's power. The Word being spoken (with an eternal Holy Breath) loved us into being. Christmas is the reminder of just how much that love stretched into all creation.

So, what left turn will you allow Jesus to take you on this Christmas tide? What could be different now for you with God the Incarnate (embodied) Word being made known?

And to consider what Paul was trying to communicate to the church living in Galatia (modern-day Turkey) What does it mean to belong? To be adopted by God, to be a sibling with Christ? To call out from our hearts, "Abba Father"... which is basically like calling God "daddy"

How might Jesus make the song of your life sound different because you are an heir, through hope, of the most remarkable heritage? Who knows, it might make you sing in the car too.