

Daniel Tate Sermon, December 29, 2024, Sunday, St Ambrose, Foster City, CA

The Feast of the First Sunday After Christmas

Lectionary: Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 147 or 147:13-21, Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7, John 1:1-18

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, Be acceptable in Your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Today is the first Sunday after Christmas, the last Sunday of the year. In three days, it will be January 1st, 2025 a new year. Many of us will make lists of things we would like to accomplish, what we would like to do, where we would like to go. I will. And yet, we don't have to do anything. Everything has been done for us. All we have to do is give thanks. Isaiah says, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God."

The Psalmist says, "Hallelujah! Sing praises to our God! And then goes on to say all that God has done." God heals the brokenhearted. God lifts up the lowly and casts out the wicked. God gives rain, and wind, makes grasses, and green plants to serve us. God provides food for the flocks and herds when they need it. God goes before us protecting us with peace and the laws of the universe. God blesses us with children. Galatians tells us that God gives us faith. And John in our gospel, describes the gifts of Grace and of The Word.

The Word in John 1 is the translation of the Greek word Logos. Logos means, word, speech, utterance, message, reason, principle, or wisdom. In Greek philosophy, it was associated with the divine reason or the mind of God who ordered the universe. In the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis, God speaks and creation comes into being. In the New Testament, at its basic, logos means word, speech, or the act of speaking. (Acts 7:22). On a deeper level, logos means the revelation of God to people, including through scripture (Mark 7:13), and further the personification of God in Jesus the Messiah. (John 1).

In the John 1 Prologue, Jesus was in the beginning with God. Jesus the Word, Jesus is introduced as the eternal, the personal of God to us, the revelation of God, the way God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit communicates to us.

All of this is given to us. No matter who we are, no matter what our station. It's not just about material things, money, houses, cars, although these things are very important. It is nice that we have this building we can come to and be together in, and that the teachers have the tools here that they need to teach their students.

It's more about our bodies, relationships, the air we breath, clean water, how we keep rejuvenating day by day with sleep and rest and pleasure and the gifts of love, beauty, nature, music, literature, the arts, humor, conversation, intuition, kindness, listening. Then there are the gifts of the Holy Spirit found in our Book of Common Prayer drawn from Isaiah 11:2-3: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. We didn't ask to be born, we just were; to live, we just are. We are alive. Our hearts keep beating. We keep breathing.

This is just a brief outline. The gifts we have been given are endless, and we don't have to do anything but to receive them, appreciate them, absorb them. Life is roaring by. And it will be over in a flash. There is so much pleasure and goodness in this world. It's hard to choose, it's hard to prioritize.

I visited my nieces and nephews and their kids and families for Thanksgiving and Christmas. There are so many of them. At Thanksgiving I held my grand-nephew, baby Adam, at the time two months old. At Christmas I didn't. Instead, I focused on playing with two-year-old Lilyanna and talking to the grown-up kids. Which was great, wonderful. But, how could I have not checked on the now three-month-old baby Adam? He will never be three months old again. Life is roaring by.

In my hospice chaplain role, I remember spending time visiting a man who was caring for his dying wife. All his life he'd had projects that he was working on and he had achieved a lot materially, intellectually, and spiritually in the world. He and his wife had a big family too. Caregiving and grieving is hard work. He eventually made the spiritual decision to not have projects anymore, and that he was just going to try and be. For spiritual practices he decided he was going to spend more time in prayer and meditation and in nature for self-care.

How do we make sure we take in these gifts, receive them? We can slow down. We can pay attention. Ask God for help through prayer, ask help from each other. We can develop spiritual practices, mindfulness, live more in the present, be flexible, be willing to change plans in the moment when opportunities arise. So many times, I've missed opportunities for relationships for friendships when I've been focused on trying to get something done, or trying to get somewhere to do the next thing. The pace of life can be fast. At the hospital if I'm not careful, I can just move from one patient to the next, not taking time out. Be willing to say yes more to invitations for lunch or coffee. Be the one who invites. Be discerning and have the wisdom to say no to distractions and time-wasting activities. Focus on the good, give thanks and praise God as our scriptures are encouraging us to do today.

True, there are terrible difficulties in our world and there is much that needs to be done, and that we think needs to be done. There is real suffering in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, and Sudan; at our borders; and in our cities. Homelessness continues to rise.

But we are in the beginning days of Christmas time. The Epiphany is well over a week away. Our scriptures are encouraging us today to stay awhile in this time, to receive, to praise God and give thanks.

Our scriptures are also asking us to meditate on the nature of God. Jesus teaches us who God is. "No one has ever seen God. It is God, Jesus, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Jesus makes God known to us. We see God through Jesus and through each other.

The Christmas story is about God becoming a baby. The divine God became a vulnerable child who cried, who needed to be cleaned and fed, who had needs, and was cared for. God became

one of the hungry, cold, dirty, and another one of the sometimes lonely people of the world. Jesus grieved and wept. God is not separate from us. God is one of us.

As Christians, we can't turn away from the needy, because we worship a God who became one of the needy.

Along with John, our Collect too teaches us about God. "Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord." The light of God is in us, and we can spread it to those who need reminding of the light of God in them. Paul in Galatians and John tell us that we are children of God. Because God became a child, like we all have been, we are related to God and so are children of God. Let us continue to praise God during this Christmastide, these Twelve Days of Christmas we are now in. Let us continue to celebrate and give thanks for the birth of Jesus and truly receive, taking in all that we can of what God has given us.