

November 28, 2021

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT: *The Grammar of the Universe*

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Recently I had a conversation about preaching with a friend in ministry from another denomination. The conversation began by them asking what Advent looks like at La Verne Church of the Brethren. I was instantly flooded with 50+ years of memories; 50+ years of raising fresh holiday greens on the first Sunday of Advent, 50+ years of singing Christmas carols, 50+ years of hearing the Christmas story anew, and 50+ years of anticipating the gift of Incarnation in this sanctuary with all of you. It was overwhelming in the best possible way!

My friend shared about the beloved traditions of her congregation and then confessed that she was feeling uninspired heading into Advent. "How is it possible to say anything new about the Christmas story", she asked.

Over the course of this conversation we came to the conclusion that the only way to answer the question of "how", was to address the "why". Why have people for two millennia told the story of a child born in a Bethlehem manger; of angels announcing his birth to shepherds; of wise men traveling a great distance to see him with their own eyes? We wondered what deep human longing does the Christmas story speak to? Could it be that within the Christmas story lies the grammar of the universe?

The grammar of the universe is a phrase Marilynne Robinson, theologian and Pulitzer Prize winning author, used in an article she wrote about how rationalism can cause us to limit ourselves and our sense of wonder.

Robinson writes:

The modern world, insofar as it is proposed to humankind as its habitation, is too small, too dull, too meager for us. After all, we are very remarkable. We alone among the creatures have learned a bit of the grammar of the universe."

She wants us to wonder at "...a universe more intrinsically orderly, capacious, and finally unknowable" than our modern age gives us space to imagine.

That phrase – *the grammar of the universe* -- captures my imagination and ultimately led me down a rabbit hole, which so often happens when I work on

a sermon. If you type grammar into Google the first thing that comes up is an online tool called Grammarly, which promises to correct all your mistakes so that you can present your best self.

Grammar is the way in which words are put together to form "proper" sentences and grammar is the bane of my existence! Should I compose something in an improper way- a comma or apostrophe in the wrong place or the incorrect choice of word, someone will inevitably let me know. So, I agonize over what I write, reading and re-reading, typing and re-typing what I have written until it feels like the life has been sucked out of my words; all in reverence to "proper" sentences.

I have heard preachers referred to as word-slingers. When I first heard that phrase, I imagined an old-timey preacher, dressed in a long black tunic with a white collar, carrying a well-worn Bible. Once perched behind the pulpit, they suddenly whip out words like Wyatt Earp at the O.K. Corral, peppering the congregation with messages of hell and damnation. I have a vivid imagination. Through the life of this congregation, La Verne Church of the Brethren has been blessed by the gifts of many great word-slingers, Tom and Susan are among the very best! These modern day word-slingers have a decidedly different style than the one I just described. They sling words that take us on a journey and invite us to see ourselves as intricate players in the ongoing story of God's love for creation.

Words have power. Words create, comfort, transform, challenge, correct, enlighten, save and even heal.

In the beginning was the Word...

And the word was with the one who had the power to create...

To soothe...

To transform...

To challenge...

To correct...

To enlighten...

To save...

To heal...

In the beginning the ultimate word slinger spoke life and love into being!

The author of the Gospel of John, when telling the story of Jesus, begins at

the very beginning, not with an angel and a young woman but with creation itself. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Then John moves to share the incredible news that the Word became flesh and blood and took up residence with us or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases, "moved into the neighborhood."

The first chapter of John is poetry and song. An ode to Incarnation...to our God who chooses to become human....to be born into our world... to take on our lot in life.

Emilie Townes, Dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School teaches her students about the difference between being a tourist and being a pilgrim. In a nutshell, tourists are visitors. A tourist is more interested in their *experience* of the place rather than the place itself. They hit the top ten must-see hot-spots that show up on all the travel lists.

But pilgrims...sojourners... travel to a place and settle in, they take up residence. They learn the language, customs and ways of the people who live there. The traditions of the people in this new land become the traditions of the sojourner.

God Incarnate is not a tourist but a resident. God speaks the local language. God understands the grammar and God is the grammar.

Our scripture text today says:
The Word that spoke creation into being...
That Word became flesh...
That Word chose to take on the form of humanity...
That Word became something you could see and touch...
That Word moved into the neighborhood.
Incarnation!

Incarnation is God's most precious gift to us. Incarnation is a deeply intimate commitment to us. The Infinite comes alongside the finite and becomes vulnerable.

God in flesh. God who loves us enough to want to fully understand what it means to be human. God who loves us enough to want to be present...to be available.

The grammar of the universe is not only creation. It is also Love.

John reminds us:

- That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
- That we have seen his glory
- That it is in this fullness that we have received grace upon grace.

The word grace is used only four times in the whole Gospel of John...each of those four times is in this first chapter. The Word becomes flesh and then grace itself becomes incarnate. As Karoline Lewis writes, "...the entirety of the Gospel of John will show what grace looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like, and feels like."

God incarnate embodies grace upon grace.

When word becomes flesh the whole Earth is touched with the grace of God. As Frederick Buechner wrote: *...incarnation means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it.*

That's why we gather each year to celebrate Advent. We refuse to be trapped by the modern age of rationalism. We long to witness the mystery and wonder of the universe that spoke life, love and grace into being and into us.

In this season of incarnation I invite you to hear the angel chorus sing of God's arrival, to hold the Christ child in your arms. Then look around and witness the Word becoming flesh all around you. God loves us so much that God moved into the neighborhood.

From the fullness of Christ, we have all received grace upon grace. Carry that grace in your body. God incarnate here...now...in you. Share that grace with the world. You are not a tourist. You are a sojourner of grace in your neighborhood.

In the beginning was the Word
For the Grammar of the Universe is creation....is life.
And the Word became flesh
For the Grammar of the Universe is love.
And the Word dwelt among us
For the Grammar of the Universe is grace.
Amen.

