

December 27, 2009 - Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple [PDF] (Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18)

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." My daughter looked over my shoulder as I was studying the Gospel for today and she goes, "Ah, not that reading again." I was like, "You know, it's so familiar." And I kind of went back and checked because I thought, "Well, maybe did we just read this recently?" I didn't think so. And I went back and checked the lectionary and we had not. But apparently it's read often enough that she immediately tuned out. So don't tune out.

However, when you're in the prologue of John, you're into some pretty beautiful hymnity, but some pretty thick theology. The Word was with God. The Word was God. He was in the beginning, on and on. And so I'm going to look at that from the perspective that I share of someone who really doesn't understand philosophy very much. I have this philosophical question. Where was God before the beginning? I mean, if it's the beginning, then what comes before a beginning? Where was God before there was an earth? Where was God before there was a universe? Where was God before there was time or light? Before the creation, where was the creator? Before there was a "there," where was God?

Now, we have to think about this a second. Before there was a painting, there's a painter. Before there's a housing development, there's a developer. Before there's a garden, there's someone who imagined the garden. And before any one of these small creators could use their imagination to conceive of a painting, a housing development or a garden, there was a God who imagined him or her.

Where do babies come from is a question that sends a cold shiver through the backs of young parents. But it's a big question and it doesn't have to be a biological question. It's kind of a dreaded question. Where were you before you were you? Well, maybe someone would say you didn't exist. Maybe a scientist would say evolution and chance have led to you. Perhaps a Buddhist would say, well, you were you, but you were somebody else. But the Psalms have an answer to this question. Where were you? This is addressed in Psalm 139. The Psalmist writes, "You Lord, your eyes beheld my limbs when as yet there were none of them." God could see you before there was a you even knit together in your mother's womb. We are conceived in the imagination of God.

People had a question after the death and resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus ascends into heaven, you have to start to thinking about this Jesus of Nazareth as also the son of God and where was the son of God before he was Jesus of Nazareth. And the prologue to John's Gospel is sort of a pointing -- it's not an answering -- it's a pointing at this mystery, where was Jesus before Jesus was Jesus? Jesus was with God. Jesus was God. Only Jesus was not called Jesus, but called the word of God. The word of God is the action of God. God said, "Let there be light." God's speech is the word. That Holy Trinity, that one God, is this threeness, this creator, this Word, this spirit. The Word of God is the action of God which brings, conceives the idea of something and brings it to fruition, to creation. To say that Jesus is the Word of God tells us that while Jesus was fully human, just as human as you or I, Jesus was also fully God. You and I have come to know Jesus as the son of God, has been there from the beginning. Not just a creation of

the divinity, but an essence of the divinity itself. The incarnation of God is the ultimate act of God's imagination. In the birth, life and death of Jesus, God imagines God's self. God's invisible, transcendent self. God conceives that into our humanity. God reveals God's divine self by imagining us into a perfect human being.

All right. So, you've gone to sleep. What does all this philosophical stuff matter? After all the gifts of Christmas, the ones that come in wrapping paper and stockings, after all the presents are given and received and now we're starting to think about returning them, what we have to come back to -- a few of us anyway -- on the first Sunday after Christmas, what we come back to is the gift of what God has conceived in us and for us. The gift of God's imagination coming into life and flesh to live with us and as us. It's the gift of our imagination, I think, that keeps the presence of God within us and makes us possible to seek and serve and give life to the presence of God in our world.

All right. Let's move from the philosophical to the commercial. Think of the movie It's a Wonderful Life. I just saw this again recently. You'll remember A Wonderful Life. George Bailey played by Jimmy Stewart. George Bailey is contemplating suicide on Christmas Eve. He has reached the depth of despair. His building and loan company is about to collapse despite years of effort and sacrifice. Years of deprivation for himself and his family and all it seems to become tumbling down and he's about to tumble himself down into these cold waters off a bridge when Clarence the angel rescues George, so to speak, from that attempt. And then the angel uses imagination to show George what Bedford Falls -- you remember how this goes -- goes back and shows George what Bedford Falls would look like had George not been there. Shows George Martini, the immigrant, who would not have housing for his large family. Shows George the pharmacist whose life has fallen into an oblivion of alcoholism because George hadn't been there at the right moment. Shows the unhappy life of so many in this little town and shows the town itself fallen into depravity because George hadn't been there. It's imagination that allows George to go and see the real gift and presence that his life has been in this community.

In the same way, Dickens, even more imaginatively, uses a spirit of the other world to get Ebenezer Scrooge to think about what the world and the how world could look differently if Scrooge could be freed from pride, from greed and from his cruel disregard for the welfare of others.

Here's the point when you go home to lunch today. It takes imagination to create the change, the transformation we seek in our life and in our world. It takes imagination for the scientist to discover new medicines, new cures, new treatments. It starts with imagination as well as ingenuity to build affordable, quality low-income housing with people who never had hope for housing. It takes imagination to build schools for girls in Afghanistan and Kenya. It takes imagination to look at a swamp in Belize and see and then call into being a school for the poorest of the poor. And it took the imagination of God to bring God into everything in our life. To breathe himself, en flesh himself in the sorrowing and sighing and living and dying of our lives. It takes holy imagination. The incarnation of God is an extravagant, undeserved way that God imagines how humanity might work and look and live in the presence of other lives.

Two stories. At Christmas I often think back to my father's last Christmas before he died of aftereffects of radiation to the brain. He would describe to us in the early phases of this decline how his mind's eye was disappearing. He could stand in one room of his own home and not be able to see or imagine the next room even though prior to this, he would have been able to tell you completely what was in the next room. He had lost his ability to see beyond what was immediately around him. And it was a prison and it was awful and it was -- watching him was to hear how he could see his world vanishing. This was his last Christmas. And what our family did, as he was losing his ability to see beyond his closing-in world, is that we became the incarnation of the love of the world for him. We gathered from all over the country to make sure we were there -- as much difficulty as it caused grandchildren and children to be there -- to be the real presence of Christmas incarnate and in flesh for him. We were present to him though he did not know how to be present to us.

Another story. This is from my friend who lives in Wales so he sent out a little e-mail Christmas card about a 53-year old child's Christmas in Wales. And he writes this about his mother. "She didn't know it was Christmas Day. Only the day before yesterday we talked through the arrangements. She insisted that she stay the night. But this morning, she thought it was Sunday. She came with me somewhat reluctantly. She sat down at our table and ate smoked salmon. And with the champagne, she swallowed her slow release morphine. Between courses she slept by the fire, a roaring oak log fire. The sprouts were too hard, the venison was lovely, but hers went to the dogs. No, she wouldn't have any Christmas pudding, not even if it was her recipe. And she slept by the fire, a roaring oak log fire. We washed up the dishes. I cried. She used to be my mother." My 50-year old friend was just a little boy missing his mother. She was no longer able to be fully, truly present to his little boy. But what my friend couldn't see, maybe in that moment because he certainly deserved to cry, was that he was being fully, really as humanly present as he could and that was exactly the gift she needed.

Let's imagine a world full of peace and pursue it. Let's imagine a world free from war and pursue it. Let's imagine a world of kindness and service and forgiveness. Let's imagine a world where human failure and human betrayal are healed and the brokenhearted are bind up because we have seen that world because we see what the eyes of the incarnation, what God has done for us and how God lives in and with us. Let's use our imagination, a God-given gift, to see body and blood and bread and wine.

Madeleine L'Engle writes in her book, The Glorious Impossible -- this is how she understands Jesus' life and presence in the world -- The Glorious Impossible, Jesus was God. Jesus was human. She writes, "We human beings seem quite capable of accepting that light is a particle and light is also a wave. So why should it be more difficult to comprehend that Jesus was completely God and that Jesus was completely human? Of course it takes imagination," she writes. "But it also takes imagination for us to understand as we watch a glorious sunset, it's the planet earth that is turning, not the sun that is setting."

My friends, welcome to the season of imagination. We are once again in the beginning. Let's begin again. Let's begin again to see life where the world sees death. Let's begin again to see the image of God in every human being. Let's begin again and take our imagination to look around and look ahead and have faith that the Word of God incarnate is still with us and in us and we are that body of Christ and that God has given us work to do. Imagine a world full of the peace of God, the love of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit because it's right around you now. Amen.