

Christmas at John's House     John 1:1-5

Do you have a favorite smell?

Maybe this time of year  
it is your Christmas tree.

Or maybe it happens to be  
peonies in the spring;  
sunscreen at the beach;  
mountain air;  
warm cinnamon rolls from the oven;  
babies after their bath;  
puppy breath,

I know somebody here  
loves puppy breath!

There are lots of smells  
that stir emotion up in us.

For John the evangelist,  
it is the smell of old books.

You can find John

sitting in a study the carrel at the public library  
taking in deep breaths,  
because he loves that smell  
of yellowed pages and musty book covers.



John, like Mark,

doesn't have any real,  
what we might call Christmas-y décor.  
John's house isn't what I'd call traditional,  
it is eclectic;  
but with mostly what you notice  
are the windows.

They are floor to ceiling  
and they are everywhere.  
John's Christmas décor  
is to put a simple candle in each one.

He built his house  
so, he can see the brightness of day  
and fullness of night:  
his kitchen faces the rising sun  
and his den/office faces the setting sun.  
In the evening you can see  
there are luminaries set up  
along the sidewalk entrance.

When you get to John's house,  
the warm glow is obvious  
—he's got a small fire in the den  
and he's eager for us to come inside.

Though you might have been  
expecting him to look more prophetic  
—more like John the Baptist,  
*(he's quick to correct people  
who mistake him for being the Baptist  
—it happens with such a common name)*  
but John the evangelist  
really looks more like, well,

Devon—  
John the professor;  
John the philosopher;  
John the poet.

His glasses are thick but necessary  
—John spends a lot of time  
with his nose in a book  
or his eye toward the skies—  
and he spends so much time in his head,  
other details are ignored.

He gets lost in his work,  
and he doesn't keep track of time.  
The sequence of things isn't terribly important;  
it's usually all over the place for John;  
what matters is  
the meaning behind the words.

While some professors  
are better lecturers  
than they are conversationalist,  
John is good at both.  
He's a good storyteller too.

*Come in*, he beckons us to sit  
and warm ourselves by the fire  
and as soon as you sink  
into his well-worn sofa,  
he asks what new thing  
you've learned lately.

It is one of the things  
about coming to John's house.  
Where you might have been in charge  
of bringing the challah bread at Matthew's house  
or diapers and Aquaphor at Luke's house,  
here at John's  
the only thing you have to bring  
is a new insight.



'Well,' you start off,  
'I've learned that in Ezekiel,  
God was upset with Israel'  
—yes, he nods, knowingly.  
Then you explain  
that you were reading  
in your morning devotion in Ez. 16;  
God described the birth of Israel  
as if she were an infant.  
'*Hmm*,' he says, and his eyes begin to crinkle at the corners.

'And, there in verse 4,' you continue to tell him,  
the text says, "As for your birth (*Israel*),

on the day you were born  
your navel cord was not cut,  
nor were you washed with water to cleanse you,  
nor rubbed with salt,  
nor wrapped in cloths.”

*‘Yes, and what does that tell you?’*

John’s excited now.

You reply that, it seems  
that the Jewish normal birth rituals  
didn’t take place.

But what stuck out to you  
was the part about *the cloths*  
—because Luke says  
the sign of the messiah,  
is that he’d be in a manger  
wrapped in cloths.

And Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths!  
So, the savior of the world  
had a very normal Jewish birth.

*‘Exactly!’* John shouts.

He loves it

when the scriptures are used  
to interpret themselves  
or give insight and meaning  
on the story of Jesus.

He’s all a buzz talking about  
the ancient traditions and 1Century homes  
and spouting something  
from the book of Malachi,  
but he’s talking so quickly  
it’s hard to understand him.

*I’m so glad you’ve come, he tells us.  
I hope you have time for a story.*

Mark's Christmas story began  
when Jesus was in his 30's.  
He was baptized and spends lots of time  
in the wilderness.

Matthew begins his Christmas story  
with a family Christmas tree,  
tracing Jesus all the way back  
to Father Abraham.

And Luke started his story  
with two pregnant cousins  
and miraculous birth stories.

Where will John's story start?

John takes a small nod from Matthew  
and starts with origins.  
But John goes back  
even further than Father Abraham.



*In the beginning* John starts—  
it's probably best to go ahead  
and turn your cell phone off  
because John starts all the way back  
moments before the beginning:

“In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

<sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God.

<sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him,  
and without him  
not one thing came into being.

What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.

There is no mistaking  
that John loved Genesis.

The poetry of it  
more than the facts.

He knows the authors of Genesis weren't historians,  
they were storytellers  
—they were in charge  
of giving God's people a narrative  
to inspire their imaginations,  
and stir their hearts to awe and wonder.

The Genesis story  
was meant to be a starting point  
at which the people of God could say,  
here is not only where our story began  
but here is where all stories begin.

So, John starts with something like Genesis  
because his Christmas story  
is meant to stir the heart  
into wonder and awe too.

It is a birth story,  
but not a birth story  
like his contemporaries  
—he doesn't start with a virgin girl  
or an adopted father.  
He doesn't start with the wilderness  
or the miraculous.

**He starts with  
the mysterious,  
pregnant potential  
of the divine.**

For the church in the western hemisphere,  
John's gospel has long been  
the gospel read on Christmas Day  
—it is full of promise and hope.  
The image of light was important  
to people who in the midst  
of the dark cold of winter.

This tradition  
of reading the opening of John  
came from early church  
who would begin their Christmas readings  
at sundown on Christmas Eve.  
Just as the darkness is beginning,  
they would read Matthew's gospel first;  
starting with his family tree.  
Next, once darkness had fully set in,  
they would read from Luke,  
about the angels  
coming to the shepherds at night  
and filling the sky with good news.

Then as Christmas morning began to dawn,  
they would read that the shepherds  
went to Bethlehem  
just as the sun would begin to rise.  
And in the full light of morning,  
they would read John's gospel!

The church would not only experience  
the birth of the Jesus Christ, God incarnate,  
they would see  
the world come back to life  
as morning filled the skies.

This was referred to  
as the two incarnations  
and they would go hand in hand; together.  
Christ being born into our world  
and light reemerging from her bed of darkness.

This made John's gospel,  
the poetry and mystery;  
it put his Christmas story  
at center stage.

As the church rejoiced  
Over the birth of God's saving Son  
they were also reassured  
that winter would not last,  
spring would come  
and so, creation would be reborn.

This made perfect sense  
for our farming and laboring  
ancestors of the faith.

And so, for many years, as a result,  
the church has prioritized  
the importance of light over and against dark.

*However*, we are beginning to see  
the harm and fallacy  
of that kind of dualistic thinking.

This false dichotomy  
where light is better than dark  
has some serious implications  
for our lives today  
and it is important enough  
to address.

When the church makes light better than dark,  
how do our neighbors,  
our brothers and sisters:  
**how do our children**  
with darker skin tones  
hear that message?

Does it reinforce a primacy  
of lighter skinned-ness;  
of whiteness?

For a moment, don't rush to,  
why is Heather making this political?



Because we the church,  
for many years,  
have subtly used language  
that makes darkness bad and sinful  
and lightness good, pure and righteous.

We no longer can use the excuse  
that we didn't know our language was harmful— it is.  
And I think John  
would want us to look again  
at his message  
and see how both light and dark  
are central to his Christmas story.



You see, the light that John speaks of,  
is light **born** out of darkness.

Rev. Wil Gafney,  
a prolific African American, Womanist professor  
at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, TX writes,  
“I have come to appreciate Advent  
so much more  
without the light/dark binary.

Rather I see darkness  
as the generative space  
in which light is conceived  
and from which it is born.  
Both holy,  
both life-giving.”

*In the beginning was the Word...*  
the light does not come from light,  
it is nurtured and grown and birthed  
from cradling and holy darkness.  
We need the dark

as much as we need the light.  
All creation comes from a place  
of darkness and hiddenness.  
Seeds are buried in the deep warm,  
darkness of soil.  
Babies are incubated  
in the warm, rich darkness  
of the womb.

John is poetically matter of fact  
when he claims,  
“All things came into being through him,  
and without him  
not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him **was life**,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.”

This is John’s testament  
to a creation that needs both  
the light and dark.  
The dark is no more important  
than the light  
and the light is no more important  
than the dark.

Because what came into being  
through the Word was **life**  
—life born from the darkness  
and given breath in the light.  
No longer do light and dark  
need to be mutually exclusive.

Many of us know, firsthand  
that the things we learn in the dark  
and sometimes painful parts of our lives  
are the most generative.

And so, John's poetry of the Word  
being life and light  
are to be understood as  
wisdom and abundance  
that comes from Christ.

Barbara Brown Taylor, writes,

"I have learned things in the dark  
that I could never have learned in the light,  
things that have saved my life  
over and over again,  
so that there is only one logical conclusion.

I need darkness  
as much as I need light."<sup>1</sup>

"There is a light that shines in the darkness  
and we need the darkness  
for that light to shine."<sup>2</sup>

Using great love and care,  
we can affirm the places in our lives  
that seem dark and desolate  
because of the lack of hope and love.  
These are the places  
that are lonely and forgotten,  
that are scary and sometimes  
life threatening.

But John's Christmas story assures us  
that there is promise for those places.  
When our collective and individual lives  
seem to be overwhelmed by  
fearful, threatening,  
harmful and life-ending places,  
we are given hope  
that life and love are still present.

In the great churchy hymn by Martin Luther,  
A Mighty Fortress is Our God—there is the verse,

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

"The prince of darkness grim,  
we tremble not for him...  
one little word shall fell him."

Have you ever wondered what that *one little word* was?  
Was it a secret code word?  
Was it a churchy creed that  
promises to *fell* the prince of darkness:  
the scary and fearful,  
lonely places in our lives:  
have you wondered  
what that one little word is?

It is a baby wrapped in cloths  
lying in a manger.

That one little word:  
the Word that was with God  
in the beginning  
and was God  
and is God.

Scott Black Johnson says this [incarnation] means God  
refuses to watch our suffering  
from a distance.<sup>3</sup>

God refuses to let anything overtake us  
because promise of Christ  
is that all things come from him  
and what comes from him  
is life,  
for all people.

Christmas at John's house  
is about light and dark;  
it is about new insights  
and reimagining our beloved texts  
so that all people  
are given hope and assurance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Scott Black Johnson, Christmas at John's House John 1:1-5 (Special sermon series, Dec. 23, 2018)

Christmas is a continuing incarnation.

The story of our God who can  
birth stars, moon and sun in the sky,  
and use the darkness of a tomb  
to bring everlasting life.

As night falls and as the day breaks,  
we can see the Christ born among us,  
full of grace and truth.