

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
First Sunday of Christmas
Sermon by The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

The prologue of John,
which we heard this morning,
may seem either like the simplest
or the most complex
poetry we've ever heard.
The bottom line message
offered by John's introduction to the person and role of Jesus
in our salvation is that before and through all time and eternity,
God offers us both our creation and salvation,
by the act of God releasing and revealing Godself to us.
It is an enormous gift to know
that God holds all of our lives in love,
that time before our conception, during our life,
and through all eternity,
as Jesus was "in the beginning"
and is present in our lives this very moment,
and will walk with us through all of eternity.

The key here is that the birth narrative
we love and hear on Christmas Eve
was not an add-on,
but rather part of the original plan.
God planned to save us.
God planned to offer us an invitation
into a relationship which would heal us,
heal our relationships with each other,
heal our relationship with God
and with all of God's creation.
Luke and Matthew tell of the birth narrative

through shepherds and angels.

John tells us of Jesus' birth as part of the creation story.

The Gospel writer John connects our creation with salvation, in the person of Jesus.

The simplest way for me to explain this to you is to tell you a story.

One you shared with me about two years.

It was a time for me when creation, healing, and salvation came together, and I began to comprehend more fully, what the prologue is really all about.

As you may remember, about 2 years ago, Bill and I were moving into our home in the woods.

It was a glorious time of anticipation, of hope, and of seeing a dream come true.

We planned the design of our home to fit within the woods, for the woods to always be the most important feature of locality, and it seemed we had accomplished that.

The colors we chose, the limited number of trees

I was willing to allow to be cut down all were a part of the larger plan.

We wanted to settle into nature, to allow ourselves to be formed by it, in ways we hadn't yet,

nor possibly could ever really understand.

I loved walking through the woods as our home was being built; I relished the opportunity to feed the wild turkeys and the deer and felt only slightly guilty

when I asked Bill to lug the 50 lb bags of corn

back to the feeding trough;
I imagined I was inviting the birds into our space
with birdfeeders located near the house,
only to realize,
we were the ones invited into their space,
and I needed to go deeper into the woods to feed them.

We moved into our home during the month of February.
Two months later my mother died of heart disease.
I found I had to make sense
of the two extremely strong and seemingly contradictory emotions
I was feeling at that time:
I was profoundly happy to be residing where we were,
to wake up and see the sun poking through the trees,
to see the woodpeckers feeding in the yard,
to witness the backlighting of the sunset colors
against the trees as I looked out our bedroom windows
in the evening.
And I was of course profoundly saddened
by the loss of my mother and all the emotions
that particular loss entails.

How, I wondered, could I be so happy and so sad at the same time?
How could I so feel the presence of God
each time I looked out
and saw the wild turkeys at the feeding trough or
the budding of the trees,
when I was mourning my mother so deeply?

Not feeling as though I had to rush forward
with an immediate answer, I gave it some time.
As the afternoons grew warmer in the spring,
I felt compelled to sit on our patio

whenever my schedule permitted.
I merely sat and I let creation do her work.
Overtime, God healed my heart,
or at least began to mend it.

And in one bright revelatory moment,
I realized it was God,
through God's creation,
through the light,
through the trees,
through the spring rains,
who had erased some of the pain,
which had offered me hope.

Creation, healing, and hope all came together
and I knew it was all from God.
God and I suddenly shared a new language.

This is what the prologue of John is all about.
God is present in our creation,
in our healing
and is always available and wanting to offer us a life of hope.
The prologue can be as simple as this.
We can understand that our natural world (including us)
was not only created by God,
but actually reveals God.
God is present everywhere, to use all possible resources,
to be our salve,
to be our healing balm,
to offer us hope,
to offer us God's very own love.

We all know from our Genesis story,
that God spoke creation into being.
When we speak, we reveal something of ourselves.
We open ourselves up to a vulnerability,
which for us humans can be daunting.
When God spoke, it is also true,
according to John's prologue,
that God revealed something of God's self,
offered us something of the real essence of God,
so that we would know the true nature of God.

The true nature of the God,
from so many different avenues,
we know is love beyond measure;
is an openness which invites us to enter into the mystery of God;
and extends beyond any one of our own particular lifetimes.

I am sure we all have stories of how we found comfort in nature.
Of how the endless waves by the ocean pulled away sorrow,
or how the morning sunrise lifted your spirits,
or how the sweetly falling snow
made you feel enveloped by a peace beyond all understanding.

John's prologue tells us this morning
to know this response is part of God's plan.

This is God's intention
that creation and salvation go together
and makes real to us God's love.

Through God's desire to save us,
God draws us back into creation
and into the act of creating.

For as we create with God, we are saved.
And as we are saved, we are called to create.
It goes both ways.
For God's creativity,
which bore the world into being through speech,
is also deep within us;
calling us to offer God's love,
through our own conversation with each other,
with God,
and with creation.

It happens in a lot of ways.
Sometimes it's with words spoken to each other;
sometimes it's in our carefully planned liturgy,
where the rhythm of the words
and the pauses in silence create a holy melody all of it's own;
sometimes it's in times of deep silence,
when we can settle in and really speak with God
in a way that words would distract us.

Perhaps one important part to remember from the prologue
is that it is relational.
God is calling to us.
Speaking directly to us.
Asking us to respond.
Asking us, like Luke's did in his version of Jesus' birth,
to bear God into the world.
Our calling as Christians
is to allow Christ to lift the veil
and let us see and be the love of God to one another.
May we see within God's creation,
may we see within our relationships with each other,

may we see within Christ's salve,
Christ's healing ointment,
our salvation and our journey toward peace.
May we feel the power of Christ's healing,
may we see the face of God
in the contagious laughter
which seems magically to erupt among dear friends,
or in the old couple who walk down the street each day
holding hands,
in the fields around us when they are covered with snow,
or in the greening time of the spring,
in the cries of the humpback whales,
the sound of which resonates with our soulful yearnings,
in the first green sprout of the perennial plants
as they poke their way through the hard early spring soil,
in the stirring of the waves,
whose undertow seems to be able to pull away from us
our sorrow, or worries, or despair,
in the toddler's outstretched arms, which say, hold me, love me,
be worthy of my trust,
in the light of the eyes we love,
in the light of the moon and the patterns of the stars,
in the whistling of the wind through the trees,
in the doctor's compassionate look,
in the breath taking gift of song,
in all these forms of God's creativity,
let us find the face of God.
For this is the truth of God.
It is always and everywhere.
Drawing us and all of creation back into the loving arms of God.
Our calling as Christians is to articulate the truth of God:
that from the beginning God loved us, created us,
and knew to save us.

This is what it means to belong to God's family.
We are interrelated ~ at a very deep level.
For God is in the midst of us.
And when we really know this,
we can live always in hope and joy.
I'd like to conclude with a poem by John Phillip Newell,
who is a priest in the Church of Scotland
and is known for his expression of Celtic spirituality.
I think this poem articulate what the prologue is all about,
for it speaks of our response to this enormous gift of God:
our creation and salvation, all wrapped in one,
in the person of Jesus.

Whichever way we turn,
O God, there is your face.
In the light of the moon and patterns of stars,
in scarred mountain ridges and ancient groves,
in mighty seas and creatures of the deep, whichever way we turn,
O God, there is your face.
In the light of eyes we love,
In the salt of tears we have tasted,
in weathered countenances, east and west,
in the soft skin glow of the child everywhere,
whichever way we turn,
O God, there is your face.
There is your face, among us.
Amen.