

## Immersion

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

2nd Sunday of Christmas - January 2, 2022

Text: John 1:10-18

GOSPEL READING          John 1:1, 10–18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the world, and the world came into being through the Word; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John testified to him and cried out, "*This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'*" From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Some of you may remember the 1960s comedy *The Odd Couple*. It's about a couple of guys with big flaming egos, and how relationships go bad when those big egos clash. This is the line I remember: One of the main characters is a TV sportswriter. Polishing up his ego, he tries to impress his naive young date by telling her about his important job, reporting for TV. Her eyes get wide and she breathlessly says, "Ooooh! Where do you get your ideas?" A bit of a takedown!

I for one hope 2022 brings us some new ideas in the world of news. Some creativity. Some *good* news. Haven't we had enough variations on the covid theme, on wildfires, war, and weird weather events? Forgive me for being flippant. I know it's no joking matter. When I think of the thousands, and millions actually living through those events - starving in Afghanistan, laboring for breath in ICUs, unhoused in Kentucky and Colorado - my heart drowns in sorrow. You can't make up news this sad. And we seem to be immersed in it, day after day. When will there be good news?

A poem by Thich Nhat Hahn comes to mind. Who do you think are the we he mentions?

The good news they do not print.  
The good news we do print.  
We have a special edition every moment,  
and we need you to read it.  
The good news is that you are alive,  
that the linden tree is still there,

standing firm in the harsh Winter...  
The good news is that you have wonderful eyes  
to touch the blue sky...  
The dandelion is there by the sidewalk,  
smiling its wondrous smile,  
singing the song of eternity.  
Listen! You have ears that can hear it...  
The latest good news is that you can do it!

Though the writer himself is Buddhist, I think the “we” could and should be Christians. The very core of our Christian faith is good news. The world “gospel” literally means “good news.” We *can* see and hear it. We *are* immersed in it. We are immersed in the Word through whom all things were made: the linden tree, the dandelion, the eye, the ear, the arms that make hugging possible. The same Word became flesh and immersed itself in our world, put on our skin and pitched a tent in the middle of our Boy Scout camp. Or our refugee camp. Or our neighborhood. That is good news.

I’m going for total immersion here, because the best way to experience something is when it’s all around you. When I was a teenager, I had the opportunity to visit the Minneapolis Institute of Art. For the first time in my life, I fell into a painting, *Olive Trees*, by Vincent Van Gog. The leaves, the sky, the shadows seemed not just painted but alive, inviting me in. Ten years later, I fell into the painting again: this time in real life, in the olive orchards in Crete. “In Crete,” we would say, because you don’t just wander about on the skin of that beautiful island, you dive into the deep end and the experience swallows you whole.

This past week, with my sisters and a friend, I attended the Immersive Van Gogh exhibit in Minneapolis. The exhibit plunges you deep into a world created with paint. Sunlit fields, petals unfurling, wings beating, flames flickering, stars spinning, all wash over you in dazzling motion.

I wondered what Van Gogh himself would have thought, bathed in his own work? He lived such a hard life, and struggled so much, yet he has brought those of us who come after him so much joy and beauty! I wonder what Good News writer John would have experienced? I imagine him laughing hugely, and saying: Yes, that’s it! You are in the painting, and the painting is in you, and the painting is the world, and the world is the Word, and the Word is God!

John the Gospeler has John the Baptist say something that sounds like a riddle but isn’t: “‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” Ego takes its rightful place behind the great mystery.

What I’m trying to get at, and what I believe John was getting at, and the whole spiritual experiment is getting at, is this: we are immersed in God and God is immersed in us, germinating, budding, blossoming, seeding, laughing, weeping, delighting in all that is good and lovely to look at; and also solemn and breathless with wonder. Christmas is the story, not just

about a long-ago baby, but about good news that keeps pouring in through the cracks until you are submerged in its breathing depth.

The gospel is about how relationships get right when flaming egos don't get in the way, when we can trust in someone who came before us, who will still be around when we're gone, who is so much bigger than we are that there's no contest. And how it feels for you to be bathed in beauty, swimming in love, until goodness spills out from inside you, and streams into the world.

Jesus was the baby born once in time; Christ is not his last name, but the term we use to describe the eternal creative Word that colors every painting, and moves in every dance, and sings in every song, and knits all the torn pieces back together better than ever.

This is the good news I hope and plan to listen for in 2022. This good news doesn't deny or ignore the tragedy and complexity of the world; no, this is the gospel that will help you feel the sadness without succumbing to despair, and will let you shine in the darkness without dimming your own light. To encourage you, I give you this, from an ancient prayer of protection called St. Patrick's Breastplate:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,  
Christ in the heart of every one who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,  
Christ in the eye that sees me, Christ in the ear that hears me.

And from St. Paul, "I can do all things through the Word who strengthens me." Now that's good news. Amen. Thanks be to God.

## **Prayers**

As we enter this new year, God of past, present, and future - remind us that we can experience this world in which we are immersed through the lens of your love, and contained safely in your mercy. May we live inside a prayer that never ceases, so that we may see the sorrows of the world without despair, but reach out in understanding to help where we may. Especially we remember those who lost homes in fires and tornadoes and typhoons and erupting volcanoes; those who have lost loved ones to covid, and those who are facing starvation in a brutal winter, or who have been displaced from their homes by war and conflict. Show us where and when and how to help. We pray, too, for those immersed in a made-up world built of false information; may we seek to bring truth without harshness or condemnation.

We pray for those especially dear to our hearts: all who are suffering or homebound due to cold, illness, or age. We pray for all those we care for, remembering that your love for them is deeper still, and your comfort infinite. Be with us now, wherever we are, as we come together in a special way to remember your eternal presence with us and within us, in your gift of communion. Amen