

In the name of God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

I remember, vividly, the first late night Christmas Eve service I went to growing up. I was probably twelve or thirteen, and I was an acolyte at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the Episcopal Church I went to growing up.

Now, midnight mass at the Chapel of the Cross is one the most formal, liturgical, and “highest” church services of the year in what was already a church that really loved its “bells and smells.” I was there to be part of what seemed like a small army of acolytes. The choir had practiced for months, getting ready for dozens of anthems and hymns. Even before the service began, a thick cloud of incense filled the huge sanctuary. It was warm, as it often is on Christmas in North Carolina, and was made warmer by the hundreds of people who had come inside wearing Christmas sweaters.

The service started in almost complete darkness. Only the pascal candle was lit in the middle of the sanctuary, surrounded by the congregation. The procession began, with even more incense being burned as the cross and the candles and the choir processed down the long aisle. Then, I remember the Deacon stopping, and by the light of the pascal candle, reading the first words from John, the words we heard today:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

I remember this reading coming from the middle of this dark church like a kind of hazy, mysterious song. Or like poetry. It seemed, particularly at this late hour, in this dark church, on this holy night, so mysterious.

What did this reading mean? The word was WITH God and word WAS God? He wasn't THE light but he was testifying TO the light? In the haze of the incense, after my usual bedtime, in this warm church, I just remember being utterly and completely **captivated** by this reading and utterly and completely **confused** by it. *(PAUSE)*

Now, it turns out that these opening words of the Gospel of John have had this same captivating and confusing effect on others besides myself. And actually, there are a number of Biblical scholars and theologians who critique the beginning of this Gospel, arguing that it describes Jesus in way that is aloof, removed, and too distant. This reading, they argue, undercuts our ability to feel connected to and be in relationship with Jesus.

I get that criticism. There is certainly something that can feel distant about the Jesus that is described in this passage. It can certainly more distant to than the image of a baby lying in a manger.

But when we look more closely at this reading, when we try to puzzle through its poetic and mysterious language, what begins to emerge is actually a story of – and an invitation to -- a closeness and connection to God at an astonishingly deep level.

This passage tells us that the Word of God became human and lived among us. God's love, God's power, God's word took human form and lived on earth.

Now, to be totally honest, I wrestle with the divinity of Jesus. I sit with big questions about what it means that God came to earth and dwelt among us. This, for me, isn't a simple or easy part of my Christian faith.

But even as these big questions swirl around me, what **is** clear, and what I am deeply drawn to, is the belief that God **wants** to be close to us. And that we can, in our actions, our words, and our lives, accept that closeness that God wants. “But to all who received him,” this passage says, “he gave power to become children of God.” This is an invitation – an invitation to welcome God into our lives. An invitation to strive to be daily incarnations of the love, the justice, and the peace of God.

During college, I spent some time in Mali, in West Africa. While I was there, I visited the city of Djenne, which is home to the Great Mosque of Djenne, a massive earthen Mosque that seems to just rise out of the desert landscape. The city is also home to dozens of Islamic schools, and children come from all across Mali for religious education here. As you walk around the city, you see kids of all ages carrying these smooth, worn wooden tablets covered in Arabic script. While we were there, we were told that in some of the schools, there is a practice of writing verses of the Koran on these tablets, then washing off the ink, and drinking the water that was used to wash them down. The idea, we were told, is that you are taking in, drinking, fully ingesting the words of the Koran so that they might become part of you.

This is the image I try to carry with me when I think about the invitation from today’s Gospel. How can I receive God’s presence so deeply that it is as life-giving as drinking water?

I know that at least one way I can do this is to commit to a spiritual practice. Whether it’s in a time of silence, or saying evening prayer before I go to bed, I strive to make some space for God to enter. I don’t hit it out of the park every day. There are sometimes weeks or many weeks that I don’t make this space. But as we begin the church year anew in Advent, and as we hear those mysterious words, “In the beginning was the word...,” I invite all of us to begin or to renew our closeness to God. To find ways to intertwine ourselves more deeply with

God. To be open to receiving the Word of God in our daily lives. And to go out into the world rejoicing that God wants to be close to us.

Amen.