SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas (B)
December 25, 2026

[RCL] Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12); John 1:1-14

An Irresistible and Radiant Humanity

Merry Christmas. As is true of every holy feast of the church, each of us brings a different collection of needs, hungers, questions, and reasons to give thanks. You are here, probably, to *listen* – for the first or the five-thousandth time, to 'hear the good news of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation,' in the words of Isaiah. But, probably, you are also drawn to *see*. To see and exclaim, even before hearing, even in the midst of many cares and sorrows: *How beautiful. How beautiful*: the messenger's feet upon the mountains. *How beautiful*: the holy arm which the Lord has bared. My God, *how beautiful*: this Child we have sought with the eyes of our hearts for so long.

Christmas, for Christians in the West, is *the* foremost opportunity to re-embrace the medieval impulse to look and to touch; to *show* things of great meaning first, *then* to tell as commentary on the showing. So today, and the next eleven days of Christmas after that: Look! Touch! Taste! Smell! Clap and point and jump up and down at every shiny, lovely thing. We need to engage these impulses in acts of worship. It is easy in this world to forget the path to this *holy* ecstasy, this self-spending in the pursuit of meaning, rather than luxury and waste.

Contrary to the pseudo-Christmas of the world, what we are doing here in worship is no mere *indulgence* of the senses. This is no distracted gawking, or greedy grabbing, or tasting because our tongues are bored while hungry mouths are empty. Our God knows how very good yet how very distractible our senses can be. So, in the words of St. Athanasius in his *On the Incarnation*, "He came to center our senses in himself."

Christ's incarnation has opened the door to the deeply Christian act of *beholding*: This is pleasure taking hold of joy; this is beauty yielding a vision of truth. If our beholding is honest, here, too, especially this year, is pain; but it is pain unlocking the storehouse of compassion. This is the shimmering wrapping paper that makes way with an ecstatic rip for the gift *within*. This is entering the stable at Bethlehem and, when we make our way home, knowing *with our whole being* that we have not merely been informed or entertained or gotten a good bargain out of the experience. Rather, in joy, in beauty, in pain, *we have seen God*.

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"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory." The prologue of John's Gospel, as always, resists logic and throws us into the domain of deep intuition and desire: to look, to touch, to believe. This bond of warmth and genuine love with God, John suggests, will make itself known by making itself felt: in physical sensations that enfold us or catch us unawares. It will erupt in emotions that we cannot hide or control. It will whisper across the surface of awareness in epiphanies of the gut as much as of the mind. And the knowledge it will impart is a knowledge of *God's glory*: "glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."

What is this glory? In Christian tradition, glory is God's visibly revealed, interpersonally mediated presence. It is something physical and available to our senses that opens us to God's loving gift of Godself. When we receive it, it usually breaks our hearts open. For us, Jesus Christ is the supreme mediator and embodiment of this glory.

Beholding God's glory in Jesus, we are invited to gaze at the beauty and savor the pleasures of creation in the sure knowledge that "all things came into being through him." All things are sacramental. They are signs, speaking a language of divine meaning, of light made visible, of life made tangible, of overflow from a divine source. Seeing this takes continual practice. The secular worldview suggests that material reality is an end in itself; that beauty is about surfaces rather than depths; that pleasure is only for the young, healthy, and rich. Christmastide beholding defies this idolatry with a gaze that knows and loves its Creator in the eyes of a helpless child.

Now just as crucial—and even more scandalous to the world—is the Christian calling to seek and behold the glory of God in situations and experiences that are *not* outwardly beautiful or pleasurable at all, and that seem to hold no spiritual value. The promise and scandal of the manger is the same promise and scandal as the cross: glory shining within and through situations and experiences that are humble and ordinary; in situations and experiences that are insignificant, dark, or empty; in situations that are even repugnant and tragic. God's glory is sacrificial love, suffering with and in every person and creature in need.

There is a reason we celebrate Christmas at the darkest time of the year. There is a reason why, the Eastern Church's icon of the Nativity show a dark cave at their center, which shelters the manger. There is a reason why Jesus's knock on the door of our hearts comes at midnight. There is a reason why the world prefers too much light, too much empty dazzlement, at this time above all: to prevent us from opening that door and learning to follow Jesus in the dark.

We draw near to the infant of Bethlehem in the darkest time so that we may receive him alone as our Light. We draw near to his shivering and impoverished parents because we need, again and again, to see a glory purged of worldly self-reliance, triumphant materialism, and the will to power. Our beholding of his face teaches us to see by a light the world cannot see or receive.

What can *you*, what can *we* do, to receive and offer more of this Light?

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Let the Word made flesh become flesh *in you*. God's solidarity with the material universe in Christ embraces all matter, but especially the human person, who is a microcosm of that universe. The Word that became flesh uniquely and forever in Jesus of Nazareth, through the gift of his human mother's consent, desires with a cosmic longing to enter the world afresh and continue his saving work *by means of you*. You are essential, your consent is essential, and your love is essential. Nothing less will do.

Martha Graham, the visionary pioneer of modern dance, gave some astonishing advice about this personal involvement and consent to a divine, creative force. A colleague, Agnes DeMille, recorded a conversation she had with Graham in 1943 and later published in *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*. DeMille was at a moment when she felt tempted to doubt the value of all her previous work. Graham counseled:

> There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening
> that is translated through you into action,
> and because there is only one of you in all time,
> this expression is unique.
> If you block it,
> it will never exist through any other medium
> and be lost.
> The world will not have it.
> It is not your business to determine how good it is;
> nor how valuable it is;
> nor how it compares with other expressions.
> It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly,
> to keep the channel open.

We could easily say the same thing of God the living Word: "a vitality, a life-force, a quickening."

Again and again, *incarnation* waits for the unique and open channel of your love. This process is not driven by motivation to express one's individuality or to leave a mark on the world. It is the desire to please God alone by acting as a conduit for God's self-revelation.

And yet, in those who have let the Word truly become flesh in their particular and irreproducible lives, an irresistible and radiant humanity emerges. They are the real deal. They are truly human, in the most godly way. Perhaps the Word has already become flesh in you many times, and your soul or your body—or both—bear the stretch marks and the scars of your God-bearing.

Please, do not hide that glory. *We need it.*

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The glory of God is always a glory shared. Our participation in the church's community of prayer makes the glory hidden in the work of Christ manifest to the world, so that all who are drawn to him through us may "see and believe." Glimpsing this glory at work in our lives, may those who seek its Source exclaim: *How beautiful. How beautiful*: the messenger's feet upon the mountains. *How beautiful*: the holy arm which the Lord has bared. My God, *our* God, *how beautiful*: this Child we have sought with the eyes of our hearts for so very long. *Amen*.

Br. Keith Nelson *joined The Society of Saint John the Evangelist in 2014 and made his life vows in 2019. He has served as the community's elected Superior since 2024. He is passionate about sharing Christian contemplative practices as tools for living with faithful attention, intention, and presence, as well as practices and perspectives that awaken us all to conscious kinship with the whole of God's creation.*

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