

God Is NOWHERE MAN

Sermon, December 19, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Texts: Micah 5:2-5; Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

Some of you may suspect (or remember) there are a few typos in the sermon title, and you are correct. The typos are significant and intentional; they're not the church secretary's mistakes. Left as is, the sermon title may call to mind (at least for those of my generation) a top-of-the-charts Beatles song from 1965 written by John Lennon. A little trivia fact: "Nowhere Man" was the very first Beatles release to be entirely unrelated to romance or love or boy-girl interactions; it marked a notable shift to a more philosophical bent in John Lennon's songwriting ... moving a bit beyond "She loves you yeah yeah yeah." In a 1980 interview Lennon said he wrote the song by himself and about himself; he had been up all night trying to write and the words came to him in a rush just before dawn. Fellow Beatle Paul McCartney said of the song: "That was John after a night out, with dawn coming up. I think at that point, he was a bit wondering where he was going ... and to be truthful so was I." Which, by the way, is a poignant and even amazing observation about these two young men who seemingly had it all while in their twenties ... they had first come together in a band when McCartney was the ripe old age of 14 ... and were wildly successful, immensely wealthy, and enjoyed worldwide recognition but they apparently lacked a sense of purpose, identity and life direction. So, John Lennon wrote what were, by his own account, these autobiographical lyrics of "Nowhere Man" (excerpts):

He's a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody.
Doesn't have a point of view, knows not where he's going to; isn't he a bit like you and me?
He's as blind as he can be; just sees what he wants to see. Nowhere man, can you see me at all?
Nowhere man, don't worry. Take your time, don't hurry. Leave it all 'til somebody else lends you a hand.

This is the same songwriter who six years later wrote the lyrics to "Imagine" in 1971 (this solo single of Lennon's has been described as an "atheist anthem") "Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky, imagine all the people living for today...." So, to make a bit of a warranted stretch, I think if John Lennon was our church secretary, he might have added a comma to the title so that it would read: "**God is nowhere, man.**"

Now, I would partially agree with his editing. There should be a comma! But that is not the only typo. There is one more. This typo, when corrected, might change Mr. Lennon's whole outlook and perspective on life." This typo, when corrected, might take you somewhere. This typo, when corrected, conveys a message of hope and purpose, rather than a message of aimless purposelessness, despair and meaninglessness. The typo, when corrected, can turn cynicism into joy, it can bring stability out of chaos, it can bring meaning and direction to an otherwise pointless existence AND it can bring light into our darkness. Let's add the correction. Let's place a space between the "w" and the "h" and include the comma. That gives us the corrected title and it also gives us the essential message of the hope of Christmas:

"GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN!"

This is what Christmas is about! That's the message of the angel to Joseph! GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN! "Emmanuel, God is with us." He is now here. This season we celebrate that the One from beyond time and space, the One Who is and was before anything was, the One who brought all things into being and Who sustains all things still, the One beyond, behind, and above all reality has now become *tangent* with that reality. He has become a part of His created reality. It is the Creator in creation, the Artist becoming a living part of His canvas. In the wonderful words of Charles Wesley: "Veiled in flesh, the God-head see. Hail the incarnate Deity." Technically, He's not just "veiled" in flesh, as though He was wearing a costume, but He became truly human. He fully entered into human life. All of the immensity of God that can be absorbed in humanity has become visible... in a baby.

I well remember years ago a woman telling me her story of coming to a vital Christian faith while in her mid twenties ... about the same age as John Lennon when he wrote "Imagine." She vividly recounted for me how, months later, she was in church singing Christmas carols during worship and experiencing something of a personal epiphany as she began to fully realize for the first time the weight and meaning and immense import of the lyrics of these familiar carols. She had sung them many times before, but never with any sense of full appreciation of the glorious message of the lyrics and the miraculous nature of what was being communicated and celebrated. With eyes flashing and a voice full of intense emotion and holding an imaginary hymnal in hand, she told me, "I stood there in that pew with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat as I realized the depth of what I was singing as these lyrics just leapt off the page: 'Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see! Hail the incarnate Deity! Pleased as man with man to dwell ... Jesus, our Emmanuel!'"

By the way, and some of you may remember this ... I married that woman.

This can never be minimized ... God has been born into this world! We celebrate the story of Christ's birth, the proclamation of the Incarnation of God in human form, the great good news of the arrival of the One who is

Emmanuel, God with us. It really is a mystery so immense we really can't get our minds around it. We read the story, we act it out in Christmas tableaux and pageants, we sing songs about it, we write poetry and compose music, but words seem insufficient to express the immensity of such a mystery.

"Immensity Cloistered In Thy Dear Womb"

Poet John Donne (1572-1631) is perhaps best remembered for his lines:

No man is an island, entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thine own
or of thine friend's were. Each man's death diminishes me,
for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know
for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. — *Meditation XVII*

John Donne's "La Corona" ("The Crown") is a cycle of seven sonnets of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, two of which are copied below.

2. ANNUNCIATION

Salvation to all that will is nigh ;
That All, which always is all everywhere,
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Lo! faithful Virgin, yields Himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb; and though He there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He'll wear,
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.
Ere by the spheres time was created thou
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son, and Brother ;
Whom thou conceivest, conceived; yea, thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother,
Thou hast light in dark, and shutt'st in little room
Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb.

3. NATIVITY

Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-beloved imprisonment.
There he hath made himself to his intent
Weak enough, now into our world to come.
But O! for thee, for Him, hath th' inn no room ?
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from th' orient,
Stars, and wise men will travel to prevent
The effects of Herod's jealous general doom.
See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eye, how He
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie ?
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee ?
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

Anglican theologian and poet John Donne wrote a cycle of seven sonnets about the life of Christ, entitled *La Corona* ("The Crown," not "The Virus!") two of which are in the bulletin insert this morning, one entitled "Annunciation" and the other "Nativity." I invite you to read these sonnets on your own in the days to come ... I just want to focus on a few lines and words in the time we have left this morning. I absolutely love the line linking these two sonnets – "*Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.*" What stands at the heart of this season is the mysterious claim that the immensity of God ... the One who, as Donne puts it, "...fills all place, yet none holds him" ... chose to fully enter into human history, into the material world, into the "stuff" of our physical beings through the womb of a young mother. As Donne so inimitably expresses it, in the miracle of the Incarnation Mary had the unique, remarkable and ultimately inexpressible experience of being her son's sister, her Maker's maker, her Father's mother. "*Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity, pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.*"

God is now here, man. In Jesus Christ, God put aside His divine prerogatives to become one of us. The One who called Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life came to show us the Way to live, the Truth of what really is, and to give us Life that is abundant, full and eternal. That is what we celebrate this holy season. Friday and Saturday we will celebrate God entering the stage of human history ... not amid trumpet fanfare or the pageantry of royal courts, no news conferences, no photo-ops, no front office people to put a spin on the events ... no, the immensity of God simply "slips in" unnoticed. Well, not *quite* unnoticed; He couldn't help but let a few others in on it with angelic hosts, a few shepherds, and a miraculous star leading a few others onto the scene ... but He slips in as a child born to young parents who are on the road, miles away from home ... the birth coming, like all births, on its own inconvenient, yet demanding schedule. He is born not in a palace, but in humble accommodations, and placed in a manger for a bed ... an animals' feeding trough.

It's important to note God did not come in anger, filled with wrath, lusting for punishment or vengeance. God came in goodness and loving kindness, filled with a lust of a different kind ... the lust to lovingly give us life. He came not as a judge wagging a finger; He came as a child just inviting us to embrace Him and hold Him close to our hearts. God took on human flesh so that forever after we may embrace this God who eagerly seeks to give what most of us spend our entire days searching after: life, peace, purpose, meaning, joy and hope. God has come to us as one of us, so that in this child, you and I might become one with God. That's why all the singing, all the rejoicing. God came into a world thought to be godforsaken, and GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN ... to make clear we are forsaken no more.

GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN. He came to fill our emptiness, to give us redemption and direction and purpose and hope, to make new our times of failure. He came to experience our pain, in order to heal it. God took on our frailty and weakness, became open to hurt, disappointment, and failure, even loss; in the incarnation God experienced it all. Before it was over, God would know what it means to be human in every dimension, from its extraordinary joys and laughter, to the depth of abandonment, suffering and death. And when this cradle led to the cross, the darkness finally gathered about Him with greatest force, set to extinguish His light altogether. When that happened, God invaded our reality anew, to do a wonderful new thing ... the light that first invaded on this night long ago at that time invaded once again transforming grave to resurrection, the despair of death to the hope of life.

In the midst of our longing and need for purpose, in the misery and shame of our failures and the shadows of our darkness, in the midst of times when God seems to be no where, the message this season is **GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN**. And that is cause for celebration. Amen.