

Christmas 2b
Jeremiah 31:7-14 Ephesians 1:3-14 John 1:1-18
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
January 3, 2021 (Traditional)

When I was twelve my Dad, my brothers and I went on a sailing trip in the British Virgin Islands. If you've been there, you know how beautiful it is: these islands like jewels floating in a bright, crystal clear tropical ocean.

There was one place we docked for two nights: Virgin Gorda, a wealthy resort island. You couldn't ask for more beauty. Everything was spotless. The brightly colored buildings along the shore, the swept streets. The harbor was clean. The gazillion-dollar yachts moored in rows at the docks, huge and sleek and graceful and shining white. The atmosphere was unhurried and peaceful. We had a good time there. We explored the island on minibikes. We rented a little motorboat and putted around the harbor. I remember it as a truly paradise-like location. Except for one thing.

On another sailboat, docked right next to us, an older couple—we assumed they were husband and wife—were constantly and loudly arguing the entire time we were there. By the end of one day we had unwillingly learned their entire story. By the end of the second day we were doing anything to escape. Anything to get out of that space where we could hear them going at it—throwing these hateful, spiteful words back and forth, seeing who could do the most injury. It was sad.

And the location made it ten times worse. It seemed impossible that people could be unhappy in a place like that. I remember being sad, thinking this is truly the way human beings are—including myself. Wherever we go, we tend to bring our personal prisons with us.

Another experience I had down there was similar. My brother and I were walking through Road Town, on the island of Tortola. For the most part it also was a beautiful place; the people gracious, the streets swept clean. But suddenly we found ourselves in the bad section of town. And once again, it was so much worse, because everything surrounding it was so beautiful. Here, was the smell of sewage. Garbage strewn all over the street. The houses with dark insides and broken windows. Beautiful little kids playing naked and filthy in the front yards. A man walked by us with eyes like pits in his skull, needle-tracks all the way up and down both arms. I'll never forget that hopeless ghost of a man.

Again, there was this jarring contrast between a world full of gifts and joys and pleasures and beauty, and another reality that human beings bring into it. A reality that twists and distorts everything it touches to mirror its own waste and emptiness.

It's a contrast you can see in our Christmas gospel: "through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made;" "and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

Our heavenly Father has commanded everything we see into existence; through His Word He created everything good and beautiful. But as this gospel tells us,

human beings choose darkness, because we can hide in the dark. Sin keeps us in the dark. It's a darkness that swallows everything up into itself. And even though we're made in the image of God, and God loves us, we are so deep in that black hole that we cannot even hear the original word. The Father is trying to get through to us all the time, but the transmission, when it enters the black hole, gets all bent and twisted up. He's saying "I love you," and what we, trapped in sin, hear is, "people will only love you if...you do this. If...you do that." The message is twisted. In the black hole, fear has taken over our lives. We bring this fear with us into every situation.

And what does fear do to us? It doesn't just paralyze us. Often it makes us over-controlling. We're not going to listen to anyone else. We reject God's word in favor of our own version of the story. I see that all the time when I read the bible, for example. I'm always struck by how differently the bible interprets reality than I do. I'm reading it and sometimes it strikes me how I would never, ever look at things that way on my own. And it's only because I have come to trust who speaks through that scripture that my mind and heart can be changed by what it says. But that's how deep sin goes. Our rhythms are off. We try to create the world according to our own sense of the way things should be, we come up with our own little schemes to achieve a personal paradise, but instead of paradise, we end up with a prison. And we carry it with us. And then, we end up throwing our garbage all over a life that was supposed to be paradise.

At Christmas God's word comes to us—the Word of God through whom all things were created—the word has become flesh in Jesus Christ. He is the exact imprint of God, he is God himself...and he has come to renew the image of God in us. A new creation, a whole new life, has come to us in this vulnerable baby,

born in a manger. He's not just a message spoken into the black hole. He is God himself, coming into the black hole to be with us. The source of all beauty and perfection, made flesh.

At Christmas God is not so much giving us a plan. He's not telling us we are going to find paradise by trying harder, by changing our habits, by sticking to our promises better. None of that is enough. Of course we should try, but not to save ourselves, because none of these things save us. What we need first is Christ...to be reshaped by God's act of love for us. He gives us his life. He is a King who will go to prison to reach people in prison. This is a God who keeps on giving paradise as a free gift, no matter how much we keep mistakenly trying to convince ourselves that we deserve it, no matter how much we keep on trying to pay for it ourselves. He has come into the black hole to be with us. This is the kind of love the world is starving for. This is why the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

What's left for us is very simple: to love him for what he's done, to take in the beauty, and all the gifts of this world, with gratitude. To know a deep joy even in the middle of the world's ugliness and losses and sorrows. To give, knowing that all has been given. We don't need to run away from the ugliness of life. We don't need to escape to some new life and new location in order to find perfection. Because if you listen at Christmas, you'll understand: For that couple on the boat next to us, whom God loves, for those poor children born into such a hard life, whom God adores, for that man walking down the street so lost, for whom Christ gave his life, for you and me—the Word has taken on flesh. Love has come. Freedom and salvation have come. And now he'll use our hands and feet to go out into this world and show it.