I recently asked a friend how his very large gathering with family went at Christmas, and as he told me about the seven-hour dinner gathering dozens of close friends and family, he suddenly erupted in laughter recalling how five different people had told the same story from childhood but they each told it completely differently. For one the event in question took place during an epic snowstorm. For another it was a bright sunny day. There was a common thread – they were all clearly recalling the same incident – but that thread was thin and fraying, and their ways into the story diverged radically. I laughed with him and said something like, “sounds like the Gospels.”

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each seek to articulate “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,”¹ but when we read them side by side we notice that they, too, each have their own way into this story. That they are each telling a unique, true version of this shared past, though the details diverge rather radically.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the beginning – their four beginnings, that is. Mark’s, the earliest, doesn’t include a birth narrative at all. Jesus bursts onto the scene, a grown man, crying “Repent! The Kingdom of God is near!” and looking for his cousin and friend, John, to baptize him. Matthew and Luke, penned a couple decades after Mark, both give more attention to Jesus’ fortuitous conception and birth, but they recount rather different details. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus birth is foretold to Joseph by an angel, wise men are led to the infant Christ by a star, and the tyrant Herod orders the slaughter of the innocents in the wake of Jesus’ birth. In Luke’s, Gabriel visits Mary and tells her she will bear a child, she and Joseph are forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of a census, and shepherds hear of the much-anticipated birth from angels in a nearby field. For centuries, what most of us think of as the Christmas story has been a creative conglomeration of these two accounts.

And then there’s John, which we heard this morning. John’s Gospel was written a few decades later than even Matthew and Luke, likely in a community that had begun to separate

¹ Taken from the beginning of Mark’s Gospel.
from its Jewish roots and been influenced by the dominant Greek philosophy of the day. Whereas Mark introduces Jesus the man, and Matthew and Luke Jesus the holy child, John wants to start his story even earlier, with Jesus the cosmic Christ. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” “In the beginning.” With this stark introduction, John echoes the first words of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,” harkening back to the foundational, primordial beginning when the molecules of carbon that would eventually form stardust and cells were still a dream in the mind of God. And boldly, courageously, says, THEN, even then, Christ was. THEN, even then, the same mystery made flesh and born of Mary was being incarnate.

Christ did not come into the world first or only in Jesus. The word of God was there, at every moment of celestial history, in every act of creation, infinitely grand and spectacularly particular, which theologians describe as God’s immanence and transcendence. In the beginning, John says, Christ was, just as Christ is, just as Christ will be.

Ann Hamilton is an internationally renowned visual artist who works with the tiniest of textiles and the grandest of large-scale, multimedia installations. She has worked around the world, transforming industrial spaces into ephemeral environments, making prayer boats on sacred waterways, building a tower modeled after a vocal cord to be used as a performance space. In 2015, she was honored with a National Medal of the Arts for her innovative work. Though I sometimes find the scale of her work difficult to engage, I love to listen to her talk about it. This shockingly creative artist describes her creative process not as one of crafting, building, making, constructing, gathering, or even creating, but as one of articulation. The act of forming words, using breath and body to offer something new to the world, is her inspiration, each detail in every project infused with the attention and intention it takes to form and offer words. She is a hands-on artist who uses the language of language to describe the bright and beautiful brilliance of invention.2

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In the very beginning, Genesis tells us, when the world was a formless void, and darkness covered the deep, God did not magically manifest matter and mold the cosmos in divine hands. Instead, God articulated: God spoke creation into being. God said, “let there be light” and there was

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2 If you’d like to listen to her talk about this, too, you can find one such enlivening interview here: [https://onbeing.org/programs/ann-hamilton-making-and-the-spaces-we-share/](https://onbeing.org/programs/ann-hamilton-making-and-the-spaces-we-share/).
light. For six days, God said let the dome of the earth be divided and the stars fill the sky and the waters be swarm with living beings. God spoke, and it was.

Ann Hamilton is attuned to mystery, as every creative person must be, and in listening for a sacred word in her own time and place, she’s stumbled upon a beautiful and timeless truth: that God never stopped speaking creation into being, and that we are both products of and participants in this divine articulation. In the beginning was the word: the beginning of all that is, and every beginning since. In the beginning after the flood was the word. In the beginning of a promise to Abraham was the word. In the beginning just beyond the Red Sea was the word. And, yes, in the beginning, when Jesus was born in the manger, *the word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.*

The hope of Christmas is not restricted to that stable stall, when the word that always was became the word made flesh, our brother and friend. The hope of Christmas is that there have been an infinite number of new beginnings since that holy night, and there will be an infinite number of beginnings yet to come. And even more, Jesus’ birth in all its divergent detail, so common, so ordinary, so human, assures us that the word was, is and will be there at each of our beginnings, too. At the beginning of life, when we came forth from the primal waters of birth. The beginning of adulthood, parenthood, professionalism. The beginning of an empty nest and an aching body. Even, yes, the beginning of life after loss, life after major change, life after earth-shaking transition, for better or worse.

I said it on Monday but it bears repeating: Christmas is not a time to ignore the realities of the world. We aren’t here to forget about or avoid the very real challenges each of us wakes up to each day. We’re here to remember that Jesus is born right into the middle of our lives, in all their wonderful and heartbreaking detail. This morning’s evocative Gospel is full of mystery, but it is also full of hope. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not, will not, cannot overcome it. The light shines even in our darkness, and the darkness does not, will not, cannot overcome it.

A few years ago I stumbled upon a poem by Rudyard Kipling, *When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted,* which we have used in our weekly newsletter from time to time here at Christ Church. It concludes:

> But each for the joy of the working,  
> and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It
for the God of Things as They are!

At Christmas, God bursts onto the scene, entering the world just as it is, a vulnerable and precious baby, the hope and salvation of the entire world. And while we know we have not quite experienced the full promise of Christ’s birth, that all of creation has not yet been restored to perfect and loving unity, we can be assured that Christmas has something to do with how God is working that out. That it is through just these kinds of moments when God breaks onto the scene, unexpected, uninvited, catching us unprepared, as a child, a kind gesture, a creative breakthrough, an inspiring sunrise, a hopeful risk, a welcome embrace, a WORD – of comfort, consolations, encouragement – that the eternal word is incarnate yet again. Christmas is anywhere and it is everywhere, not only today but now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.