
And in Jesus All Things Hold Together

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
The Last Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

Did anyone come to church this morning feeling a little festive? Thanksgiving is around the corner, school is out, family is coming in town--or maybe you're packing up to travel, Christmas pageant signups are in the atrium, and this time next week we'll be celebrating the first Sunday of Advent with music and wreath-making and a spaghetti supper. It's almost the most wonderful time of the year.

And then this Gospel comes and totally kills the mood.

"They came to the place that is called The Skull, and they crucified Jesus there with the criminals."

Even though the passage ends with Jesus telling one or both criminals crucified beside him that they will join him in paradise this day, and paradise sounds like something to celebrate, the passage still lacks a certain joyful quality consistent with the holiday season we are hoping to embrace this week.

What gives, Jesus?

Well, in a strange way, I think today's Gospel really is good news for us. And not just because we know the *end* of the story, not just because this gruesome crucifixion is a step closer to resurrection. But also because of how this story—our big story—*begins*. Today's Gospel reminds us of the full implications of God choosing to be incarnate in the person of Jesus, God with us. O come, o come, Emmanuel.

Some of my favorite stories in the Bible are creation stories. Creation is also one of my favorite things to teach about in our adult confirmation classes. From a theological standpoint, I think the creation story is pretty mind-blowing. Not because I think God created the world in a mere seven days... I actually don't believe that.

What I find most awe inspiring about creation is the loving presence of Jesus. Remember how John's Gospel describes it? "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through Jesus, and without Jesus not one thing came into being... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

John's Gospel begins with creation because Jesus' story begins at creation—not in the manger, but at creation of the world.

The text we heard today from Colossians says it this way: "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Jesus all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through Jesus and for Jesus. Jesus himself is before all things, and in Jesus all things hold together."

Consider this. Consider what it means for Jesus to be present at the creation of the world. Jesus was not some afterthought or consequence of sin and the need for salvation. No. Jesus is there at the very beginning! Before the beginning! Willing this world into being with full knowledge of the cost.

So before we prepare for the prince of peace, we too get to remember where this is going. Before love comes down at Christmas, we remember what this love will demand of the baby Jesus.

Because the resurrected Christ was first the crucified Christ, and before that was the Christ child. Jesus came

into this world the same way all of us did—born of a woman. But not before giving birth to the whole world.

Yesterday I got to sit where you are sitting now and let the beautiful music of Handel's Messiah wash over me. Some of you were here also. It was awe inspiring. I had chills several times throughout the performance—and not because I was cold, I know to dress warmly in any Cathedral—but because these familiar texts and familiar melodies point to the lavish love of God incarnate. I sometimes think that scripture put to music makes it more true.

If we look at the scripture text of Handel's *complete* Messiah, we find that despite being considered especially appropriate for the Advent season, less than half the text points to the birth of Jesus. Indeed, it is just as much a Holy Week text as it is an Advent or Christmas one.

That juxtaposition is an intentional one—just as today's Good Friday Gospel reading is no mistake.

I have an idea. A little Thanksgiving homework to get you ready for next Sunday's beginning of Advent. Pick a few of your favorite Christmas tunes and just read the words aloud.

Remember back in early Covid days when we had to read out hymns instead of singing them? That was hard. But remember how you would hear the texts differently and notice nuances you may have missed while singing them? So try that again. But this time read the hymn text while holding the image of the Christ Child, and Christ Crucified, and the Risen Christ together.

Let's practice. Do you have the image of Jesus from our Gospel text in mind? Hold that image and listen to this text:

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray,
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel!

I always love that verse because it reminds me of growing up in the Baptist church and inviting Jesus into my heart as a child. But think about all that it is saying. Naming this holy Child, asking Jesus to be born in us—while at the same time claiming this child as a savior who conquers death and casts out sin. This is God with skin on. This is who we ask to come to us and abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.

What carols or hymns bring God's love close to you this season? Read them with the fullness of Christ's creation, birth, death, and resurrection in mind. Let Jesus' full life transform the meaning of the text for you, and then let that fuller text transform you too.

Just try it.

Because when we compartmentalize the life of Jesus Christ and focus on just his birth or death or resurrection, we miss out on the fullness of Christ. We miss out on the larger-than-life-love that an eternal Christ makes real. Jesus loved you before all time, at the creation of time, at Christmas time and Easter time and all the in-between time, in our time, and beyond all time.

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. For the Bible tells me so.

Amen.