

In the Beginning: Christ Mystery, Light and Presence

Genesis 1:1-3, John 1:1-5

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In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Genesis 1:1-3 NRSV

In the Beginning there was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light, a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken. John 1:1-5 Inclusive Bible

Startle us, O God, with your truth.

Open our hearts and minds to your presence among us.

Silence all those voices internal and external, clamoring for our attentions so that we hear your Word written and made flesh.

Turn our attentions to you in Jesus who is the Christ, Amen.

For many years, John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago started his sermon with the words I just prayed: "Startle us, O God."

As you might expect this prayer has received mixed reviews. Some of his parishioners like it and tell him they miss it when it is absent. Others complained they have been "startled" enough all week long, thank you very much, and the last thing they need is to be startled again. Mixed reviews on a prayer is very Presbyterian.

What about you? When you come to church on a Sunday morning for a worship service do you seek to be startled or comforted? Maybe inspired or challenged, certainly not bored. The late John Updike once wrote: "Whatever else God may be God should not be uninteresting." He was right.

If you listen to stories and poems from the Bible, God is not boring. God in the Bible acts in ways that startle people, from the creation to the resurrection, to the building of the early house churches, through the spread of the Gospel, turning the world upside down.

I like the prayer, "Startle us, O God," because if the truth be told, the capacity to be startled, surprised and astonished has become diminished in us. Too often we are so preoccupied with our list of things to accomplish, people to see, places to go, asking Google or Alexa to answer our questions, that we shut out the capacity to be startled, astonished.

Annie Dillard, the writer says, “When you come to church you should expect to be startled, they should issue seat belts when you walk in. You should also receive crash helmets if you are really listening and paying attention to the Gospel.”

Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest, modern mystic, and author, published a book in 2019 *The Universal Christ* that includes theology and a worldview that are startling and new to many people. We are starting a series to explore his book and, as Kay Collette said last week, choose a few morsels off of his banquet table, savor them and see what we notice.

Here we are in a church, a Christian church, a Protestant Church, a Presbyterian Church where we read from the Bible and seek to follow the ways of Jesus. What is your favorite image of Jesus? Perhaps it is a picture of Jesus with children, Jesus carrying a lamb around his shoulders, Jesus the compassionate one healing, Jesus being at the home of Mary and Martha. Perhaps it is Jesus knocking on a door, the one who seeks to enter our lives.

Rohr would say those images reflect only one part of God’s presence and reality. He invites us to take a step back from the personal and see a bigger picture, a deeper truth, a universal story. Let’s start with our reading from Genesis. A creation story, more like a poem, to express something about creation and the Creator. Not science and not history, but story and poetry.

In Genesis 1, Rohr suggests that this is the first incarnation, the weaving together of the material, visible world and the spiritual, invisible world. God, the Holy One, joined these in unity and Divine Presence became the light inside of everything. He says he believes that is why light is the subject of the first day of creation. Rohr’s book is not to prove the existence of God, but rather to say, this Divine Presence of love, hope and wholeness was infused into the material world from the beginning. That is startling to many people. An understanding that this is the first incarnation. That God is not distant or only in certain sacred places, but in all things, in all matter. Creation as first incarnation.

This is important as we reflect on what we have been taught or believed. Maybe we think that some things or places or people are sacred, holy, supernatural, and other things, places or people are ordinary, earthy, natural and maybe even unholy. What if that was not true? *Everything visible, without exception, is the outpouring of God. (pg. 13)*. Rohr is not the first person to say this. He is echoing other writers, but maybe saying it in a new way.

This perspective, this worldview can change how we see and talk about people who are often described as “other” or different or foreign.

Rohr suggests that this holy presence that spans all time and place is called “Christ.” And then Rohr moves to the New Testament and John’s gospel. Let’s listen again.

In the Beginning there was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. 4 In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light— a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.
Inclusive Bible translation

John is describing something beyond gender. We can see that he is giving us a sacred cosmology and not just a theology (see John 1:1-18). Long before Jesus' personal Incarnation, Christ was deeply embedded in all things—as all things! The first lines of Genesis say that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” and immediately the material universe became fully visible in its depths and meaning (Genesis 1:1-3). The Christ Mystery is the John's attempt to name this visibility or see-ability that occurred as part of the story of creation.

Jesus was the second Incarnation. This unity of material and divine, enfleshed. Jesus **the** Christ. I like Rohr's line – Jesus is a window to the Universal Christ.

Christ is the light that allows people to see things in their fullness. Light helps us see.

Rohr uses many images and metaphors to startle us and help us sit back and think. Light, Windows. We can have an internal dialogue - I used to believe this about Jesus or the Bible or church. But if I imagine a different way to see it and see myself and the world and God's love for all the world, what might be different? How might we experience a deeper connection to the Source of Love and be fully alive in times of joy and sorrow?

In one of his Daily Meditations on John 1, Rohr offers another metaphor. Instead of “Word,” which is taken from Greek philosophy's *Logos*, he substitutes the word “Blueprint.” *Logos* is the inner blueprint, the Universal Christ, for wholeness and connection to all creation and to the Holy One.

In the beginning was the Blueprint, and the Blueprint was with God, and the Blueprint was God. . . . And all things came to be through this inner plan.

The inner reality of God became manifest in the outer world as the Cosmic or Universal Christ.

No one thing came to be except through this Blueprint and plan. All that came to be had life in him. Now it's become personalized. This great Universal Christ Mystery since the beginning of time now becomes specific in the body and the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Blueprint has become personified and visible as a human being. Not male or female.

And that Life was the Light of humanity.

John is describing a bigger life, a bigger light, from which we all draw. This is Consciousness—a pre-existent form that is the Eternal or One Light. This great Light or Consciousness is the

source of our little piece of light. You can also substitute the word Love. The Blueprint is a cosmic act of Love.

This Light/Life/Love shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

“The visible galaxies we see strewn across space are nothing more than strings of luminous flotsam drifting on an invisible sea of dark matter,” writes astrophysicist Adam Frank. ...Somehow the universe is an interplay between light and darkness.

This Blueprint was the true light that enlightens all human beings who have come into the world. So, the true light, or Love itself precedes and connects and feeds all of our smaller lights and attractions.

The Blue Print was in the world that had its very being through him. But the world did not know him. In the same way, for the last 2,000 years, we have not understood the Cosmic Christ. We fell in love with the symbol instead of what Jesus fully represented. To love “Jesus, the Christ” is to love both the symbol and everything that Jesus stands for—which is precisely everything. This lays a wonderful foundation for a new consciousness and a new cosmology—and a very different notion of religion itself. (12/4/18 Center for Action & Contemplation Daily Meditation)

So Christ is Blue Print. Christ is the Light that dwells in us, source of love, universal, ongoing living Christ is in us and in all creation. Together people & creation are the third incarnation.

If religion or Christianity or the church have wounded you or ignored your questions and doubts, then this new perspective and insight may be a source of hope for you. If you hear or read about how a spiritual life rooted in Jesus’ inclusive love is life giving, it may affirm what you have experience, or it may be a new insight. There is grace. There is a sense of home.

Rohr argues that the spirit of Christ is not the same as the person of Jesus. Christ—essentially, God’s love for the world—has existed since the beginning of time, suffuses everything in creation, and has been present in all cultures and civilizations. Jesus is an incarnation of that spirit, and following him is our “best shortcut” to accessing it. But this spirit can also be found through the practices of other religions. Rohr has arrived at this conclusion through his careful reading of scripture. “This is not heresy, universalism... This is the Cosmic Christ, who always was, who became incarnate in time, and who is still being revealed.”

I am stretching and deepening my beliefs and understanding of my faith. It is life-long. I re-read some of these sections a few times, and write a few words in my journal and then reflect a bit more. Taking a few bites at a time. I hope you are coming to this banquet table this fall.

May we continue on this inner journey and outer journey together. May be open to changing our minds and hearts and being transformed. May we find our deeper connection to universal belonging, trust and love. Amen.