

Sermon 1-3-10 John 1:1-18

Rev. Mark E. Sloss

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Do you ever remember hearing in your childhood, "Grow up?" Did you ever have that yearning in your early years to be a grown-up, when you wouldn't have to listen to anyone telling you what to do anymore? As a grown-up you figured that you would be the master of your own fate. You would be able to decide what you wanted to do and when you wanted to do it.

Today in one particular part of our gospel text I hear a call to grown-ups everywhere to grow in the opposite direction: "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Here John succinctly highlights what happens for those who don't follow the world's path of rejecting Jesus. Those who receive this one who is light and Word are given power. It's not the power to grow-up and become the masters of our own fate, but rather the power to grow-down and become what you truly are, a child of God.

I think it's important to note that John tucks these couple of verses into the grand prologue of his gospel. John's painting with a big brush here, covering all of time with his abstract poetic declaration of who Jesus was. When I connect the dots I begin to see how we got certain phrasings in our Nicene Creed: "true God and true man, of one being with the father, through him all things were made." This is John's abstract Christmas story: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

I remember learning in college that we're all born concrete thinkers, and our brain's ability to think abstractly doesn't emerge until we're into adolescence. Thus, John's mention of Jesus giving power to become children of God is directed to the adult in us.

Many spiritual teachers talk about entering into a kind of second childhood as an important progression on the spiritual journey. Entering again into the innocence and security of childhood. It's a time of recovering the joy of just being alive and celebrating the simple pleasures of life. One develops serenity and peace and new attentiveness to living in each and every present moment. There's a self-emptying in this growing down, a death and resurrection, not my will, but yours be done.

We've undoubtedly heard time and time again that we're children of God, but do we live it out? Do we trust God in the same way a small child trusts mom and dad? Have we let God lead us to a more playful approach to life, or do we take ourselves too seriously? Have we let go of our own desire to be in control of our lives, and fallen into the loving hands of the living God? In letting go, we receive grace upon grace.

I found an example of what this might look and feel like from Baptist Pastor Gordon Atkinson's blog. He writes about his experience during sabbatical of attending worship in an Orthodox church:

When I walk into an Orthodox Church, I don't know anything. I don't know the theology. I don't know the language. I don't know the practice. I don't know the deep meanings behind the symbols, icons, and worship movements. It's like being a child again. A few weeks ago I asked the nice lady at the back if I could light a candle too. I didn't know if it was permitted for visitors to light candles, and I wouldn't have been insulted if I hadn't been allowed, so deep into my child-like state was I. Children are always being told that they can't do things. We're used to it. So when she said, "Yes," I was thrilled.

Yay for me! I get to light a candle.

You know how kids are with candles; we love to light them. So I lit my candle and put it in the plate of sand with the others. I felt proud to have done it, and I looked around to see if anyone was watching me. Kids always think people are watching them. I was a small part of the worship service that day. Just a tiny part of it. My candle was one among many in a service where the candles themselves are just a small part of the whole. I kept looking at my candle, watching it slowly burn down. Another man lit one at the same time and our candles burned at the same rate, remaining the same height throughout the service. He had reddish hair and was skinny and had friendly eyes and he said hi to me after the service. I felt like we were candle buddies, our candles having been so close.

Children can teach adults how to live more fully in each and every present moment, and I've observed more than one grandma or grandpa being taught how to play again by their grandchildren. When can you last remember letting your inner child be your guide?

Pastor Atkinson's reflection reminded me of a day near the end of my sabbatical last summer when Susan and I spent the day exploring Panama Rocks near Chautauqua Lake, NY. It's a small park filled with caves and crevices, and the child in me emerged with a sense of exploration and adventure.

Each of us has a Panama Rocks much closer than we might realize. Our inner lives are full of caves and crevices to be explored. The landscape is ever changing, and there is more territory than any of us will be able to cover in our lifetimes. Yet, many people are too busy to enter in to this terrain, or perhaps they're just too afraid of how they'll be changed. How might we let our inner child lead us deeper on this grand adventure?

Perhaps, part of our hesitancy comes from our instinctually knowing that becoming more childlike might also get us more in touch with childhood wounds that we all carry into adulthood. Susan and I have both noticed in our spiritual journeys that certain unpleasant memories from our own childhoods have come to mind, when our own children reached the age that we were when our original wounds occurred. I've found this a blessing, not a curse. In remembering I'm given a grace filled opportunity for healing. Actually, these have been times when Jesus has been most real to me, when he has been the light shining in my darkness. Healing has often come with the cleansing light of God's unconditional love.

In this Christmas season we celebrate God's coming among us, or as John puts it, the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. Jesus shows us the way for being children of God. It is the way that brings us life. It is the way of forgiveness, the way of wholeness, the way of love.

Are you ready to let go and let Jesus lead you into a whole new way of life that embraces suffering as a path to peace? Are you ready to live with a more childlike trust in God's loving goodness? Are you ready to grow down?

What's that commotion? Oh, it's Jesus at the door, and he wants to know if the child in you can come out and play.

AMEN.