

Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
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Christmas 1: Ps 147; Isa 61:10–62:3; Gal 3:23–25; 4:4–7; Jn 1:1-18

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When I took my niece to visit colleges in the Northeast we saw pretty much all the most selective schools between central Massachusetts and Cambridge. Except for the place where I went to school, the tours and the information were top notch: all the important reasons why each school should be high on our list for consideration were cogently presented, the tour guides were obviously well trained (again, with the dismal exception of my alma mater). It was all so well done that I couldn't help getting excited for myself, let alone my niece, and it occurred to me that I wanted a do-over.

Now that I was more confident about my place in the world, now that I knew my intellectual strengths better and was more accepting of my intellectual weaknesses, now that I no longer had the dread of having to prove my right to sit in class with the brightest eighteen- and twenty-year-olds in the land (who cared, after all?)—it seemed like an attractive idea to sit through another four years of classroom lectures, labs, library research, and extra-curricular activities. Oh, especially the extracurricular activities, which I thoroughly neglected during my undergraduate years, thinking that any time taken away from studying would hamper my ambition to graduate with highest honors.

Well, because I never could find anything like the right attitude to tackle my studies, because I somehow lost all the innate discipline that made me a successful high school student, because I very seldom found joy in studying the subject I had wanted to study all my life, I not only did not graduate with highest honors, I had what still count as four of the most miserable years of my life. Hence, my desire for a do-over.

In a way, I suppose I gave myself that do-over a few years later when I quit my job and went to seminary. It wasn't exactly the broad intellectual challenge of another liberal arts degree; it wasn't on a spacious, spiffy campus with every possible amenity on offer these days at our elite colleges, and it certainly was not the boost to the ego that you get from being accepted into a competitive institution. Pretty much anyone who applies to my seminary gets in, unless the admissions committee really believes you won't be able to do the work.

Still, as a do-over it was pretty successful. I was learning a lot of things I wanted to learn, including how to read Scripture more carefully and with more information than I'd ever thought to do before. Most important, of course, I was reconnecting my mind and my heart, through prayer, reflection, and dialogue, with some kind of relationship to God and to Jesus Christ. In a roundabout and extremely expensive way, I was taking up God's offer—which is always being held out to all of us, all the time—of a do-over.

That is the offer being made in the Gospel of John, and especially in the prologue to the Gospel, which we always hear twice in a row—every Christmas Day and then the very next Sunday. “In the beginning was the Word,” John starts out. He is very deliberately echoing the first line of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” John is saying that the Word, the Son of God, was there at that first beginning, that first creation; all of life and all of creation came into being through the Word. And in starting out his account of the life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection of that same Word with the words “In the beginning,” John is telling us that

God is inviting us into a new creation, a creation where there is a new possibility of overcoming sin and evil, fear and despair, death and hopelessness. In other words, by coming to be with us in the flesh as the incarnate Word of God, Jesus is offering us a do-over—a big-time, major do-over.

Apparently the reason we needed this offer from God for a do-over was that we were stuck in darkness—the darkness of sin, evil, despair, and death—and we needed to be shown a new light, a new way forward. Through the embodiment of God in Jesus Christ we were shown that new light. We were shown by Christ’s specific teaching and his specific actions how God’s grace and truth come to us.

That light enables us to begin again, to change ourselves and begin a do-over, not as hopeless adults resigned to the dispiriting ways of a sinful world, but as children of God, newly adopted, newly endowed with a sense of fresh possibilities. Paul in his letter to the Galatians explains further how this works. God not only sent Jesus Christ to live among us as the son of a human mother, but even after his departure God sends the Son’s spirit into our hearts so that we can recognize ourselves, from the depths of our core identity, as children of God and heirs to God’s vision for a transformed world.

Now the thing about the do-over that God invites us into is that it is never completed. It is obvious that no matter how many of us have agreed to the do-over that there is still a great deal of darkness blanketing the earth, and so we need to persist in our commitment to the changed ways of being that Christ’s incarnation has offered us. We need to persist in naming the grace and truth that gives light to our renewed lives. We need to be persistently conscious of the fullness of God from which we receive grace upon grace.

The Word who was with God in the beginning is the same Jesus Christ who was born to Mary and placed in a lowly manger on that starlit night in Bethlehem. God’s light has been continually offered to us from that night to this day. “In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.”