



## HOMILY

SCRIPTURE: HEBREWS 1: 1-12

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, December 24, 2023, 7:00pm

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

### Hebrews 1:1-12

1:1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 1:2 but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds. 1:3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 1:4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 1:5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? 1:6 And again, when God brings the firstborn into the world, God says, "Let all God's angels worship him." 1:7 Of the angels God says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." 1:8 But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. 1:9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." 1:10 And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; 1:11 they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; 1:12 like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end."

The Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

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Here we are—ready or not. Christmas Eve 2023!

I remember as a kid how slow getting to Christmas felt—like it would never come! Now as an adult in my 50s—that slowness sensation and sweet anticipation around Christmas has given way to a visceral sense of a careening toward Christmas.

We are here, together, seeking wonder and joy in the midst of a world overworked and wearied by a year that has been an endless succession of devastating events.

2023 will go down in history as the warmest temperatures on earth in 125,000 years. There has been an almost constant onslaught of increasing extreme weather around the world.

2023 is a year that is marked by unrelenting war, multiple sites of genocidal violence under way, and extreme human suffering tolerated in ways that wither our souls.

A year when we have been confronted by the fact that we have to have another presidential election coming in this country. And the leading candidate makes no bones about his authoritarian aspirations as he maneuvers through more court cases than we can keep up with and 91 felony charges against him.

Speaking of something I'd like a little more time before I have to do... Could we skip this presidential election, please? Maybe take a break from having a president for a while. I'm not saying forever, but maybe just one election cycle we could take a breather.

You know it's been a tough year when the US Government tells us back in the summer that they actually have been covering up the fact that there are 100s, even 1000s of confirmed cases of UAPs (Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon) and even non-human "biologics" at a crash site, and humanity collectively shrugs our shoulders and keeps on going.<sup>1</sup>

It was good for a few memes though! We have time for the top three, right?

**Show memes in this order (I will read each one outloud)**

- **Alien Meme #1 ("I simply don't have time or energy for aliens, they can try again in the fall")**
- **Alien Meme #2 ("Aliens? Wake me up when something important happens, like a new pasta shape")**
- **Alien Meme #3 ("If we get invaded by aliens, I'm immediately defecting to the alien side, sorry")**

Beneath the snark is deep grief and pervasive anxiety.

We are living in times of wars that carry the weight of global catastrophe—Russia on the march— inching ever closer to Europe in its campaign to claim Ukraine. The Israeli government seemingly locked in on the utter destruction of Gaza. 20,000 Palestinians dead

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-house-oversight-committee-probes-ufos-and-wider-implications>

from the last 80 days of bombardment. Over 70% are women and children. The United Nations calls it “beyond catastrophic.”<sup>2</sup>

The United States was the biggest driver in the UN resolution about Gaza not including an demand for a cease fire. Instead it was a call to increase the aid getting to Gazans who are starving and suffering without adequate medical care. Many on the ground say the resolution is meaningless, toothless without a call for a ceasefire.

The conditions are inhumane.

And Gaza is not the only place where genocidal patterns are playing out. There are genocide warnings and emergencies all over the globe, from Gaza to Ukraine, to Congo, to Armenia, Zimbabwe, India, Venezuela, China, Cuba.<sup>3</sup>

Our collective and ancestral trauma as a human race is fully activated. We are raw, reactive, afraid, tired, despairing.

In fact, this year there is literally no Christmas being celebrated in Bethlehem. Palestinian Christians living there called off all Christmas events because of the war in Gaza. No Christmas lights, no trees, not streets bustling with tourists.

### **Split Screen for live stream, full screen in sanctuary. Display picture of ELCA church in Bethlehem “No Christmas in Bethlehem”**

This ELCA church in Bethlehem’s nativity scene with rubble around it drew worldwide attention. The priest lamented that people paid more attention to this picture than to the pictures of children in the line of fire in Gaza. He draws our attention to the fact that Jesus was born with parents on the run, a refugee.

### **Take picture down.**

2023 has been a gut punch for human dignity, for human decency, for even human survival. Our need to lament is overwhelming.

We strain to see God’s face, to feel God’s embrace tonight–this night when we long for proximity to holiness, to gentleness, to a safe place to call home. Can we even have

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/23/did-not-ask-for-ceasefire-in-gaza-biden-after-phone-call-with-netanyahu>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.genocidewatch.com/countries-at-risk>

Christmas with all that is happening in this world? What does Christmas mean in a world where Palestinian babies are born in bombed out hospitals and in refugee shelters?

Just as our ancestors looked to the stars for wisdom and guidance, the heavens are telling us to look up, to look beyond and deep inside ourselves, to remember that we are stardust, that we are made in the image of Divine Love—that mystery and majesty gave birth to the human family and to this teeming planet, and that our best possibilities are still waiting to be born.

Some of the best news in 2023 came from the James Webb telescope and the images it is giving us of things we've never seen. Wonder calls to us from star nurseries and the music of nebulae and black holes. Awe comes from snapshots of the dawn of time and the primal emergence of intricacy and light playing with dark.

**(Scroll through each picture—linger on each one for about 5 seconds)**

**Space Image #1 Star Field**

**Space Image #2 Furthest Star Ever Seen**

**Space Image #3 Neighboring Galaxy**

**Space Image #4 Star Nursery**

This night is about this wonder, the coming together of heaven and earth, the music of angels, the wonder of a new born baby with parents forced to migrate by Empire, the vulnerability of the creator of the world wanting to be in solidarity with us, the promise of God in the flesh—love here to show us the way to joy and freedom for all people.

Those awe-inspiring pictures from the Webb telescope have scientists weeping, they have them losing themselves in the wonder of it all. And they are humbled and invigorated because they are not seeing what they expected to see.<sup>4</sup>

Some wonder if our whole understanding of physics and reality is being rewritten before our eyes. Things like dark energy could have been doing different things at the earliest times of the universe than we ever imagined.

The early universe was very, very dark. Without all the starlight we see now. The light of all the stars actually makes it harder for new stars to form. So in the early universe without all the light, stars could form more quickly.

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<sup>4</sup> The “Unexplainable” podcast has a fascinating discussion of these discoveries in its episode, “Something weird at the beginning of time.” December 20, 2023  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/unexplainable/id1554578197?i=1000639190036>

Scientists are learning that darkness makes room for new creation in ways that too much light cannot.

When we look out into the infinite universe, we are peering into our deepest selves—we are learning who we are and where we come from. It is no coincidence that we are learning from space how vitality comes from the depths of darkness and that too much glaring light can inhibit creativity.

We need to slow down. We need to learn how to embrace our shadows so that they can stop doing so much harm, and we need to trust the creativity and growth that is there in those unmet shadows. We need to temper our obsession and privileging of light and whiteness, our internalization of the duality of light and dark.

The universe is inviting us to remember that our divinity, our creativity, our generativity thrives in the ways darkness makes space for growth, for repair, for regeneration, for new birth.

The incarnation is the bringing together of light and darkness in balance, in reciprocity, in love, and in truth.

You may have noticed a scripture reading that you didn't expect tonight: the reading from the Book of Hebrews that Kaola read. This reading is in the lectionary every year, but about 99% of the time, churches pass right over it and focus on the Gospel of John's first chapter on Christmas Eve.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...  
What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

John 1 is beautiful poetry. And it is a quintessential example of the way we are drawn to light as a metaphor for good, for life, for God.

The opening verses of Hebrews are equally compelling without leaning on the imagery of light. And so these verses call to us, just like the depths of the universe, to listen with our deepest intuitions to the gifts of hearing and seeing what we didn't expect to hear and see.

The beauty of the Book of Hebrews for us today is that it reminds us that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew. And he was the pre-existent Logos. This pre-existence of the Incarnate word links to a Jewish concept of the great I AM being accompanied by an aspect of divinity that is creative, generative, and who speaks life into being.

Jesus embodied the complexity of the human condition. We are earthbound bodies that suffer and die, and we hold a spark of divinity at the center of who we are. Hebrews is potent and persuasive oratory. It was a sermon, in the mid to late second century, probably intended for Hellenistic Jewish Christians in Rome.

This sermon was for a weary people. This sermon was for people who had forgotten where they came from.

Christians in the West are prone to a dangerous appropriation of Hebrew scripture as a way to mark Christian superiority. There is little acknowledgement of the way Western Christianity has desecrated and stolen the Hebrew scripture to prop up political power that is not about Jesus at all. It's about conquest and colonization. We, too, have forgotten where we came from and the resources of our healthiest ancestors.

The preacher in Hebrews was not preaching about conquest—he was preaching about cosmology and christology—the way the universe works and the way Jesus meets us where we are with what we need to be our best possible selves.

Hebrews is about worship and imagination. The crisis of their moment in Hebrews was a crisis of commitment to the cause, a crisis of waning energy, a crisis of lost hope, lost purpose. The preacher called them to remember the tenderness and the power of who Jesus was and is and can be for them to be transformed.

I can think of no other message as urgently needed for us, for our world today—than the tenderness and power of God with us in the most vulnerable and fraught conditions of human experience. And our need to follow Jesus along the way of solidarity with all who carry the weight of oppression and violence in our world.

Incarnation in such dehumanizing times calls us back to our beginnings as sentient beings.

We cannot intellectualize this elegance, this massiveness, this ethereal wonder—the cosmos that sings to us from time's beginning.

Such wonder is the only thing that can save us now—it is the restoration of our shared dignity and humility. It is the birthing bed of our coming home to our true nature, to each other as siblings, as kin.

In this cosmological wonder, Divine Love comes weak and dependent, vulnerable and naked, adorable and terrifying. This is the God who wants us to see ourselves clearly: beloved and utterly dependent on the kindness and trustworthiness of others.

Christmas 2023 is the year we really need to receive the actual gift of this season. It's not about the wrapped gifts, the trees and ornaments and all the lights—maybe too many lights! Indeed, all the lights distract us from the healing we actually need to stop propping up systems that kill, that destroy, that divide the human family.

Incarnation is about our shared humanity and the space to be who God made us to be. Our weariness does not make Christmas impossible, it makes true Christmas necessary.

Our weariness makes Christmas exactly what we need to keep going into whatever 2024 holds.

Let us promise each other and God on this dark and holy night, to fall in love again with the world, the world God longs to redeem in partnership with us.

Let us promise each other that we will believe in the healing we are capable of together.

Let us promise to receive the true gift of Christmas, that we are re-membered as beloved, each and every one.

Thanks be to God.