

The Church of the Transfiguration
The First Sunday After Christmas
John 1:1-18

A Theological Overture

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Before I begin my sermon this morning, I wanted to acknowledge the fact that Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has died at the age of 90.

Ordained an Anglican priest in 1961, and the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, Archbishop Tutu was a key leader of the movement that brought down apartheid in South Africa. He was a life-long advocate for nonviolence, reconciliation, and equality for all.

May his soul rest in peace and rise in glory.

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As many of you know, I love musicals. I'm so happy that Broadway has been slowly opening up since the fall. To be sure, the rise of the Omicron variant has brought its own challenges. But I'm glad that, overall, things seem to be moving in the right direction.

Michael and I actually have tickets to see "The Music Man" in February. Believe it or not, we bought our tickets over two years ago. The performance date has been pushed out twice due to the pandemic. But here's hoping that we'll actually be able to see the show as scheduled.

Now one of the things that I love the most about musicals is the tradition of the overture. The overture is, of course, the instrumental piece that is played by the orchestra before the curtain rises. It's a wonderful "sneak peek" of the music to come. There's nothing quite like the joy of hearing a snippet of a favorite melody to bring a smile to one's face.

I think, for example, of the overture to "Annie." It contains excerpts from favorite songs like "It's a Hard-Knock Life" and "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile." But one song stands out, of course. The overture ends with a stirring rendition of "Tomorrow." By the time the orchestra is finished playing, the audience is almost on its feet – even before a single actor has appeared on stage!

I often think of the overture as a musical "Cliff's Notes." It's a wonderful synopsis and preview of things to come.

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Today is the First Sunday After Christmas. Each year we hear the same gospel reading on this Sunday. Specifically, we hear the famous Prologue – that is, the first 18 verses – of the Gospel According to St. John.

For some of you, the Prologue may seem like a dry philosophical recitation that has little to do with the glorious story of the nativity that we've been celebrating over the past two days. Perhaps you

might have even zoned out a bit during the chanting of today's Gospel. (If so, that's OK – I won't take it personally, and I won't tell the Rector!)

Now if you are someone who finds the Prologue hard to appreciate, let me suggest a different way of looking at it. You might think of it as – you guessed it – a musical overture. Think of the Prologue as a pastiche or a “sneak peek” into the glorious theological melodies to come. Or perhaps as a “Cliffs' Notes” version of not only the fourth gospel, but of the Christian faith as a whole.

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So what are some of the theological melodies that appear in the overture that is the Prologue to St. John's Gospel?

Well, one melody is that the Word is divine, and it is a co-creator with God. That is, not only did Jesus Christ walk on this earth, but he was with God in the very beginning of time and was present at creation.

Another melody is that the Word gives life to all things. As Fr. John David preached on Christmas Eve, Jesus Christ is the life and the light that shines in the darkness – and is never overcome by it.

Still another melody is that the Word is rejected by the world. Even though all things were created through Jesus Christ, many people in the world neither knew nor accepted him.

My friends, I invite you, in the weeks and months ahead, to remember the glorious melodies from this overture. May you smile with the joy of recognition whenever you hear them again in the gospel readings each Sunday.

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But there is one melody from the overture, however, that really stands out. Like the song “Tomorrow” from the “Annie” overture, this melody is, hands down, the audience favorite.

Here is the melody: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.” Let me say it again: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.”

For me, this is one of the most important verses – if not THE most important verse – in the Bible. This verse sums up the mystery of the incarnation and salvation history. It affirms that the preexistent Word became human in the person of Jesus Christ in order to save us and to give us new life.

Now there are two interesting things about this verse that are not immediately apparent from the English translation.

First, the original text says that the Word became “flesh,” or *sarx*, in the Greek. Note that text does not say that the Word became a person, or a human being, or even a body.

The text literally says that the Word became “flesh” – in all of its frailty and messiness. If this word choice sounds somewhat crude to you, it is. The idea that divinity, in all of its eternal perfection, could take on the form of corruptible mortal flesh – would have been utterly shocking to the ancient mind.

That's why it's no accident that Jesus enters the world as a helpless baby, as opposed to a superhero who springs fully-formed from the head of God.

Second, the text says that the Word "lived among us" – that is, *eskénosen* in the Greek. This word is actually derived from the Greek word for "tent." You know, the thing that shelters us when we go camping. (As a former Eagle Scout, I have come to know many tents quite well.) Technically speaking, the text doesn't just say that the Word "lived among us." A better translation would be that the Word "put up a tent" or "set up camp" with us.

Now, as you know, tents are temporary shelters that are easily blown away or damaged. Indeed, St. Paul uses the image of a tent in his second letter to the church in Corinth as a metaphor for our fragile earthly bodies. So we should always remember that the Word did not come to earth in the form of an impenetrable fortress or a marble palace or a gothic cathedral. Rather, the Word came to us in the form of a flimsy tent. And so it's no accident that Jesus was born in a lowly manger in a stable, as opposed to, say, the Ritz Carlton.

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So what are our takeaways from the overture that is the Prologue to St. John's Gospel?

Well, first, God is actually NOT revealed in traditional notions of power, strength, or dominance. Rather, God is revealed in the messiness, weakness, and frailty of human flesh – not to mention the flimsiness of a tent.

Second, because of this, God understands – and embraces – our own messiness, weakness, and frailty. Let's face it, it can be hard to stay hopeful in the midst of a pandemic that has now entered into its third year and fourth wave. Many of you might be feeling sad, anxious, depressed, or angry. It might not seem very much like Christmas at all.

But remember that the Word was made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. And remember that Jesus put up a tent and set up camp among us. Jesus knew what it was like to be fully human. He became incarnate in order to live with us, to save us, and to give us eternal life.

And so we do have a good reason to be hopeful on this First Sunday After Christmas. God is with us in all of our messiness, weakness, and frailty. Let me say that again: God is with us in all of our messiness, weakness, and frailty.

That is the key melody in the overture that is the Prologue to St. John's Gospel. That is the key melody of the season of Christmas. And that, my friends, is music worth giving a standing ovation for.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."