

Christmas Day + December 25, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
John 1:1-14
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

This sermon did not come into existence until last night, although I'd been making notes for a few days. Normally that would be pushing it for me. But in this case it was a good thing, because my husband Bill was able to draw my attention to a story in yesterday's Wall Street Journal. "Maybe you can use that for your sermon," he said. "Yeah, right," I replied, without looking at the story. But after we got home last night from Christmas Eve here and had opened our one present, I sat down with the story. Indeed, it challenged me to think very differently about what I wanted to try to say today.

The story is titled "Christmas Eve on Space and Communion on the Moon." The author tells about how, on December 24, 1968, the astronauts of Apollo 8 marked Christmas Eve by taking turns reading from the first 10 verses of the Book of Genesis as their capsule orbited the moon 250,000 miles from earth. Their distant-sounding voices were broadcast live to the entire planet that night over radio and television. The author writes, "It was one of those moments that brought the world together, that helped us to see our common humanity as children of God whom he loves equally, and whom he placed on the beautiful planet that he made." But that is only the beginning of the story.

Seven months later another NASA spacecraft, Apollo 11, carried two astronauts to the surface of the moon itself. One of them, Buzz Aldrin, had thought beforehand that he might do something similar. But what could one do to mark the first time human beings landed on another heavenly body? The pastor of his church in Texas had an idea: What if he were to take communion? What is more basic to humanity than bread and wine? Aldrin could do it as his own way of thanking God—for the Earth and for everyone on it, and for our amazing ability to do things like build spacecraft that could fly to the moon.

So the pastor gave Aldrin a small amount of consecrated bread and wine and a tiny chalice, and he took them with him to the moon. In the radio broadcast that followed the Eagle's landing, Aldrin began by asking listeners to contemplate the events that had just taken place, and to give thanks in their own way.

But that's where the radio broadcast ended. What very few people knew until recently was what happened next—that, right there on the silent surface of the moon, Aldrin then took communion. "I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine," he wrote not long ago. "I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup." He then read from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." In fact, Aldrin had wanted to read this over the radio during the lunar transmission, but at the last minute NASA asked him not to because the agency was in a legal battle with an atheist who was actually was suing over the Apollo 8 crew reading from Genesis on Christmas Eve.

For me, this story challenges my concept of the scope of the message of today's Gospel reading. Now that the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the image of the unseen God, has been taken into the body of a person of faith on another *planetary* body, wouldn't we be obliged to say that we can no longer think of Jesus Christ only as Savior of the world? Don't we now need to think of him as Redeemer of the universe? And, as Redeemer of the universe, would not God's plan be for his Son to make God's truth and grace known to *all* sentient forms of life that have deviated from the perfection God originally established, presuming that the initial act of creation—as Genesis 1 tells us—is one of perfection, in which God sees all things as good? ...with the plan that, in the act of making God's Son known, those creatures that became lost would be restored and reconciled with

their Creator?

You might have noticed that much of what I just said was phrased as a series of questions. Much of our faith journey involves questions, and all we can do is to try to keep asking better and better ones.

But what I found was that thinking in this way sharpened the outlines of our own Christian story. Now, to me, the opening of our Gospel reading today reads not like a mystical stream of consciousness but as a statement of fact, expressed as a logical argument:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And how poignant, then, is the admission by the gospel writer that “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

That describes many of us, in our busy lives in which we put just about everything else before Christ and knowing him. There he is, Jesus Christ, on the street corner, a bedraggled elderly man who looks confused, but we are late for our appointment and too busy to stop to help. There he is again, the homeless woman lingering outside the fast food restaurant hoping for a handout and who actually needs one, not having eaten anything since yesterday morning, but we assume she’s just another scheming pandhandler. There again is Jesus Christ, the uncle in the hospital who was so good to us when we were younger but we’re too busy to visit, and then he dies before we can get there, but the truth is we weren’t really planning on going anyway.

And there is Jesus Christ, saying to us near the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you

did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” How familiar are these types of people, the elderly, the homeless, the sick—so much more so than emperors and kings, or one might say real estate magnates and government leaders. Yet, if *they* were in need and we were positioned to help, we’d jump at the chance.

God wants us to know his living Word, so he became one of us. And I can't help but wonder, on some planet teeming with life in a system deep in the Milky Way like countless ones that scientists believe are out there just waiting to be discovered, in what form there would God's living Word come? But Jesus Christ came into our world not as a lightning bolt that changes the world in an instant, nor as a wizard in an emerald city who waves his wand or pulls strings, but in circumstances so humble that any human being could identify with them—as a baby, born in an animal shed and laid in trough normally used for cattle feed. He came as one like us, not only to make God known but to make God's heart of grace known to all who believe. The Redeemer of the universe wants to be intimately known as one who loves us deeply just as we are, even in the face of all our faults and mistakes, and is always waiting for us to return so that we may be restored and reconciled. This is how we can sing in the hymn we heard a little while ago:

3 Oh, draw us wholly to you, Lord,
and to us all your grace accord;
true faith and love to us impart,
that we may hold you in our heart.

Let us make a place in our heart this Christmas for that baby, for the God who wants so much to be known by us that he humbles himself in the eyes of the world, even unto death—death on a cross. Today we begin anew that journey with the Christ child from birth to death to resurrection and ascension, followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the church is born. As our magnificent reading today from the letter to the Hebrews tells us, “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." O come, let us adore him—and let us know him.

Amen.