

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Christmas, Year C  
Sermon 1.2.22

**Jeremiah 31:7-14**

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

**John 1:1-9, 10-18**

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

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 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. But 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. 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.

(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.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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. (600)

It's been a strange week for me. On Tuesday, we four Goodmans got confirmation about what was obvious by Christmas morning: we had COVID. And while I trace back when it might have found its way into our household, when it might have manifest as early symptoms, and when I might have been infectious to others, it has undoubtedly had the run of the place since

Christmas morning. It has also made weirder still the already weird quality of time that always comes with the week, Christmas to New Year's Day.

Symptoms have waxed and waned, gone from stomach to head, fatigue to nausea, fever to congestion.

There's a lot that's confounding about this still novel coronavirus.

All this while we four, with our three dogs, knocked about in our near-empty house. Long awaiting renovation, it's now in limbo between demo and reno, echoing for its lack of furnishings while the workmen have stayed away. A project we began to tackle two years ago this February, at least it made it so whatever Christmas guests we might have had knew weeks ago not to come this year.

And now here we are back on Zoom—and on what might be the worst Sunday to be on Zoom, or at least the most ironic Sunday to spend on Zoom. It's the second Sunday after Christmas, after all, which always has us contemplating the incarnation of God, the strange and even shocking fact that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us as one of us. It's a Sunday when we're to recall how God gathers into our spiritual experiences the flesh, the body, our bodies, one another's bodies, and the body we make when coming together to commune, to enact community as the living body of Christ in the world.

It's not the best Sunday to be virtual.

Or maybe it is. Maybe that point preaches itself—as we all seek to connect but can't manage fully to commune.

Unfulfillment is sometimes a good way to appreciate what fulfillment will feel like.

It's been a while since I've had a spiritual director, a while since I've been in spiritual direction, a few years anyway. But I still use the framework a lot on myself. "In spiritual direction," Amy Fryling writes of it, "we look at the truth of our present situation and experience. The question asked is not, 'What should be happening in my life?' but 'What is happening in my life?' We look for God here, now, because the place we are in in our lives is the place where we find God."

I use this a lot. You might find it useful too. As I maintain a grip on any given moment, or hold out an aim of what I hope to accomplish on any given day, I every once in a while remember to keep the grip loose, to hold the aim open. The "ought to be" and "should be" of life is important; aspiration and accomplishment are important. But so is the "is" of life. God shows up in both—what we manage to do and what happens beyond our management of it. God shows up in

both—law and grace, just as we just read. “Law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” See, it takes both: law and grace, order and spontaneity, nature and spirit, discipline and liberation, body and breath, what ought to be and what is, our response to what is.

You thought that was a supersessionist statement? “Law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” You thought that was as if the law, which had come through Moses, was now irrelevant because of the grace and truth brought in Christ?

Yeah, it’s often heard that way—that Christianity is now the truth, and the Jewish Law is a second-best, if that. But that’s not what the gospel says here. So why bring that to the reading? Why, other than good, old-fashioned sibling rivalry: which one of us does Dad love best?

Really, why assume this new way, in Christ, cancels out the old way, the Law which gave people the modes and forms by which to live in peace, in justice, and which—the law, the common law—continue to be crucial today? Why assume that the coming of Christ means something other than what the Apostle Paul claimed it over and over again to mean, that by this new covenant the likes of us are adopted into a family already gathered, a family whom God himself seems surprised to have come so deeply and devotedly to love? According to Jeremiah, “Thus says the Lord...for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn...”

Why conclude that the new makes redundant or irrelevant the old? Why, when what it might rather accomplish is an expansion of the old, a widening and spreading of the magnanimity of God, a pouring out of grace up grace?

I love *both* my sons.

It’s one of the most discomfiting qualities of this so-called Judeo-Christian legacy of ours: that God loves us.

It’s been a discomfiting assertion since the beginning—or so we can safely think. It’s always difficult to imagine the mindset of another person. It’s still more difficult to imagine the mindset of another people, and moreover a people from a radically other time—ancient history. But it can be carefully concluded that this God of the Hebrews, of those earliest called and gathered peoples into one people—the Hebrews, the Judeans, the Israelites, the Jews—was different from the gods of neighboring peoples for his love for the people.

The gods of the so-called pagan world were decidedly more capricious than that, and self-involved. The transcendent world as imagined or experienced or given narrative by most other peoples was populated by gods considerably less concerned about the material order and its many

creatures. For this, peoples' posture in relation to their gods was often one of placation. Theirs was to placate the gods so to safeguard their own lives and livelihoods, for who knows what kind of mood their gods all might have been in?

This was less the case when it came to this god who claimed to be the one God, who was felt and spoken of as the creator of all the world, its wholeness and its countless parts, its every part and particle and magnificent fullness. As scripture unfolds and contemplation evolves, YHWH, that is the Lord God, is felt and understood and testified to as being more and more motivated as regards the creation and the people therein by one thing: love. Embodied, incarnate, relational love. "...for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn..."

And, yes, burnt offerings and sin offerings were often understood to be so offered in order to placate God. And yes, the coming of Christ and the crucifixion of Christ have often been understood as to be all about placating God. This just speaks to me of how difficult it is to shake this pagan notion—that ours is to placate, that the transcendent might well be in a bad mood, so we must do whatever we can to make sure that mood, might be it be bad, doesn't redound unto us.

Daisy is out littlest dog. When she gets anxious, there's nothing she needs more than to lick Jesse's face, to stand on his chest and to lick his face. As if her anxiety isn't a thing unto itself but is caused by something dangerous, something threatening. As if Jesse, since the man of the house, must be the locus of that threat. And as if Jesse isn't the kindest, gentlest member of our household so the one least threatening, least likely to lash out in rage. No, lick she must.

We tease her when she does this. "Daisy, the anxiety is *yours*." "Daisy, you have nothing to worry about." "Daisy, Jesse's more likely to be your safeguard and protector than the one you need to worry will be your destruction."

She doesn't get.

Do we?

Here's what's more often stated, and more recently stated, in scripture about God when it comes to us. God is unshakably in love with God's creation. The Lord God is steadfast and faithful to God's love for us, that, though God will become angry when we fail to live by love, when we fail to seek and enact justice, when we fail to be merciful and kind and honest, God's anger lasts but for a moment and God's love lasts forever.

What's more, this isn't some abstract version of love. This isn't a soft-focus-lens version, a pastel watercolor version, where the edges aren't crisp and the wrinkles aren't deep. This isn't

about whatever love we might feel in a moment of euphoria about “humanity” or “the oneness of all things”—or it isn’t *only* that. It’s also about the gritty particulars of all things, and everything. It’s about the dusty corners and tired creases, the broken and worn, the smeared and weird and discomfiting of creation.

I’ve been thinking about excarnation. While I sit on one of the two pieces of furniture in my house, while I sit, feeling a little out of my mind, sit there again and then again: excarnation. Charles Taylor’s word to describe where he thinks we are in our journey as God’s creation, excarnation names a concept we might hear in contrast to incarnation. Developed in his remarkable and long book, *A Secular Age*, Taylor means it to name “the transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice, so that it comes more and more to reside ‘in the head.’” We see this in the extreme where people assume Christianity is about what you believe, is all about having the right ideas, the right propositions, about God. But this is all just a reaction to the loss of more traditionally tight holding environments. Where once we used to live in parishes, for example, now we live in towns or cities, secular entities of governance and the state—and we’re free to come and go as we like, and we’re free to choose and choose again, and belief then becomes a solitary act of willpower on the part of the solitary individual, the willpower for which (belief) might well fade with tomorrow or find another belief system tomorrow.

There was a rumor at Harvard when I was there for divinity school. A panel of guest speakers was there, the topic at hand one I don’t know. One speaker was Hindu, from India or Nepal...? During the question-and-answer session, a young man stood up, looked white, sounded American. He started his question to this one speaker by noting that he was Hindu, and then he went on with his question. The speaker, in answering, said, “First of all, you are not Hindu.”

I don’t know if this actually happened. I wasn’t there. But I think the fact that this is even material for rumor speaks to the transgressive nature of that that man said. You can’t *say* that. But it’s worth wondering, can you be Hindu from your cul-de-sac in suburban wherever, while your dad’s playing golf, your mom’s at book club, and your sister’s at squash practice?

Can you be Christian without the church, without actual, embodied, often irritated participation in a congregation of Jesus’ weird, flawed, crucial church?

Excarnation: it all comes down to us, to the single, solitary self to hold it all together. The self, which itself dissolves when isolated and probed, dissolves or disintegrates.

For this, many are the people who’ve taken the concept of excarnation not just to name the bizarre way religious conviction and hope are to be lived out now, but to expand the concept.

Joel Oesch is one, a scholar with whom I likely have little other agreement than this. He ascribes the concept onto our whole age. “The Age of Exarnation is upon us,” he writes in a paper whose publication date I can’t find, but I imagine is around 2015. “It is an age in which we choose data over people, screen over skin-and-bones, and connectivity over community.”

If this is true, which I think it is, then it’s only become more true with the pandemic and its imperative to isolate when you test positive. To him, though writing prior to the pandemic, “Exarnation is the steady disembodiment of spiritual and communal life, so that it is less and less carried in deeply meaningful bodily forms, and lies more and more in the head and in the device.” Computers, smartphones, Zoom, Zoom.

As someone who’s suffered extreme exarnation for but a week, I can tell you, I hate it. It messes with your head. You can’t tell the time, the day, or whether the world even exists anymore, or whether frankly you even exist anymore.

As a parent to two teenagers who’ve come of age exarnate, I’m here to say, it breaks my heart.

As a pastor who’d have loved nothing more than a crowded Christmas Eve and then post-cathartic Christmas-tide, I (okay) tepidly rejoice that at least we have the whole church year ahead of us to explore the Christmas mystery and repose in its promise and wonder in its magic and move in its imperatives. This year, I lost Christmas, as did my whole household; and maybe you did too. But at least we have the church year ahead.

Not everyone does, you know. Not everyone opts in for this life that takes the abounding gift of Christmas, the astounding, pressing, dense and compressed gift of Christmas, and doles it out over the year to be savored and enjoyed, appreciated and marveled at, a little bored by and moreover amazed by, Sunday to Sunday, day to day, moment to moment, every now a chance to meet with God’s creative wonder and love, God’s incarnate presence and steadfast persistence and amazing grace. Some people just have Christmas to let in the magic and mystery of existence in the world. This is all they allow themselves.

I honestly don’t know how they do it.

Moreover, I don’t know why they do it—though I read a lot of books to try to understand how we got here and how to respond, and I know the church bears some responsibility for this. We are often cheap, brittle versions of our great and gorgeous tradition, kitsch where what people need is art, ideology where what people need is hope or wonder or transcendence or truth. We have abused our power. We have been treacherous with our authority.

But then there's this, every year at Christmas, when I tune into Christmas music playlists, I'm often surprised to find more than a few hymns in the mix. "This is just a hymn," I often say to myself. "There's nothing Christmas about this. It's just about the transcendent, the beautiful or glorious or mysterious or promising." It's as if people won't allow themselves engagement with such things at any time other than Christmas, so we have to really stuff it all in.

We don't. We can allow ourselves this. We can gather in the hope that there's something to hope for. We gather in hunger for beauty as if there is beauty to be found. We can come for love and trust that there is love, and it is good, worth even the times when our communion will be reduced to a weaker connectivity.

But this is just for a time. God's love is forever, and God's gift of our gathering in love transcends whatever impossibilities of prohibitions or "abundances of caution" might throw up in our way.

I've missed you all this Christmas. And I thank you for meeting me here on-line. And I pray safe holding in your households, a word ("household") I've come to prefer over "family" for all sorts of reasons. One reason is its implying our, all of us, needing to be held, and our many of us suffering a holding that is either too tight or too lacking, and our some of us even a holding that is not at all, never to be touched, never to be held. It can be a terrible damnation, a terrible cutting of.

The church is its remedy. The church can be a salve. If COVID brings us nothing but a better knowing of that, then I'll take it.

Thanks be to God.