

# Christmas Eve Reflections

I John 1:1-4

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

The scripture we're about to read might not, at first, sound to you like a Christmas scripture. It doesn't include any mention of angels, shepherds, mangers, wise men from the east. Unlike passages we have already heard tonight, it doesn't tell us anything really about *what* happened at Christmas. Instead, these words tell us *why* Christmas happened, what Christmas *means*. That means I'm going to need you to think with me, at least for a few minutes, because it is very easy at Christmas, especially on Christmas Eve, to just go with the flow and the feel of the season, to enjoy the warmth and nostalgia of the celebration, without ever even once thinking about what it all means in the first place.

What does Christmas mean? Listen to God's Word.

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**<sup>1</sup>We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup>this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— <sup>3</sup>we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.** (I John 1:1-4, NRSV)

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Jerry lives in the Canadian town of Newmarket, just north of Toronto. One night Jerry got up around 3:00 in the morning to get a glass of water. Half awake, as he looked out the kitchen window to the front yard he saw a large, dark shape moving slowly across the cul-de-sac. It was the shape of an elephant. In fact, Jerry's immediate double-take and eye-rubbing confirmed that it was an elephant, a real live elephant coming towards his lawn, in his neighborhood, in Canada, at 3:00 in the morning.

Jerry's first thought was, "Who do I call to report an elephant in my cul-de-sac?" His second thought was, "My wife usually makes far better decisions than I do so I better go ask her." He immediately went to wake her up. You can imagine the conversation.

"Hey babe, wake up. Wake up. There's an elephant in the front yard."

"What? What are you talking about? You've been dreaming. Go back to sleep!"

"No, I'm serious. I went to get a drink of water and looked outside and there's an elephant walking around out there."

"Shut up. It's 3:00 in the morning. Go back to sleep!"

Apparently this went on for some time until Jerry's wife realized the only way to shut him up was to go and see for herself. Turns out that when they got downstairs and looked out the window the elephant wasn't there. In Jerry's words, "This greatly angered my sleepy wife." But then just as Jerry began doubting the whole thing himself, the elephant came back into view as his wife screamed "HOLY \_\_\_\_\_! THERE'S AN ELEPHANT ON OUR STREET!"<sup>1</sup>

True story. In fact, more than a few people in Newmarket had stories to tell that next morning after three grown elephants named Suzy, Bunny, and Minny, escaped from a traveling circus and took a nighttime jaunt through the local neighborhood before their trainers could corral them and take them back to their pens.<sup>2</sup>

Here's the question. If somebody in your family woke you up tonight and told you that there was an elephant on your front lawn would you believe it? Or instead of an elephant, maybe a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer? Would you believe it? Would it depend on who it was in your family that woke you up?

This is the nature of testimony. When you testify you don't simply share an idea you heard about or thought about, you bear witness to something that actually happened and that you actually experienced. But when somebody experiences something and then tells somebody else about it, all sorts of factors go into

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<sup>1</sup> Read the whole account at [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/4iis0n/what\\_is\\_a\\_true\\_story\\_that\\_nobody\\_believes/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/4iis0n/what_is_a_true_story_that_nobody_believes/) Includes some profanity.

<sup>2</sup> Read the actual news story at <http://toronto.citynews.ca/2007/07/12/cops-round-up-3-escaped-elephants-in-newmarket/>

whether or not that second person believes the testimony of the first person. Some testimonies are easy to believe. If I go home and tell my wife that I'd just been to the circus where I saw an elephant perform, she will believe me. Why wouldn't she? Though she'll wonder what I was doing at the circus in the middle of the afternoon without her or the kids. But an elephant on the front lawn at 3:00 a.m.? That's harder to swallow.

I tell you all this because the passage we just read in I John is a testimony, and a testimony in the 'hard to believe' category. Put simply, John is testifying here that he and others met God. They are not sharing the idea that God exists, you see, but declaring that they actually met God. They go overboard to make the point. **"We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands..."**

As the story goes, Jesus was born in Bethlehem to a virgin named Mary, and then grew up and became a man who taught people with unprecedented authority and performed the sorts of miracles nobody ever imagined were possible. In the end he died on a cross, but was then raised from the dead three days later. Ultimately he ascended into heaven. All this was possible, of course, because Jesus was God – he *is* God – the eternal Word of life who came and took on human flesh and entered into human suffering, even death, so that humanity, and the world itself, could be forgiven, set free, and enter into life that is everlasting and abundant.

That's the story. John was one of Jesus' disciples. Jesus called John to follow him at the very beginning of his public ministry and John left behind his life as a fisherman and followed. Now this is a story to which John bears testimony, saying, "We actually knew this Son of God who came as a man. We were there. We heard him speak. We saw him heal people. We couldn't take our eyes off him as he died on that cross. And when he rose from the dead we actually put our fingers on the scars on his hands and on his side."

This is the testimony. Jesus of Nazareth, the one born that night to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, is the eternal Son of God, God himself in human flesh. Fifteen centuries ago, St. Augustine, one of the early Christian saints, sought to capture the mystery this way:

The Word of God before all time,  
The Word made flesh at a suitable time.  
Maker of the sun

He is made under the sun.  
In the Father he remains,  
From his mother he goes forth.  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
He was born on earth under heaven.  
Unspeakably wise,  
He is wisely speechless.  
Filling the world,  
He lies in a manger.  
Ruler of the stars,  
He nurses at his mother's bosom.  
He is both great in the nature of God,  
And small in the form of a servant.<sup>3</sup>

This is no small claim that John is making, that God became one of us and that John and others watched it all happen. He is emphatic that they watched it happen: **"This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us."** Of course, now the question is whether or not you believe it?

We can at least say this, that as far as religious testimonies go, this one is absolutely unique. Every other religion in the world originated in private. Did you know that? Every other religion in the world began when some person or another went into a cave, or into the forest, or up on some mountaintop, and, as they would put it, had some mystical experience with the divine and then came out or down and testified to other people what it was that God has revealed – some teaching, some pathway, some revelation. And people, at least some people, believed the testimony. In some cases, there are world religions with millions of followers, all believing the testimony of a divine encounter which happened a long time ago in private.

Not so with Christianity. The testimony of the Gospel is rooted in historic, *public* events. John and the others testified that these things actually happened and made their testimony at a time when lots of other people who were around during Jesus' life were still alive to either verify or refute the testimony. It's one thing to claim that God spoke to you in a cave. It's quite another thing to claim that you saw God walk around and do miracles in the middle of town in broad daylight.

But why does this matter? It matters because the testimony of Christianity, of Christmas itself, is not that Jesus came to show us the way, or to teach us the way. No! Because Jesus is God, the Son of God who has taken on human flesh and entered fully into our world,

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *The Book of Jesus*, edited by Calvin Miller (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 122.

Jesus actually is the way. He *is* the way. He *is* the truth. He *is* the life. And he gave himself, not only in coming but in dying, so that we could share in his life.

This is what Christmas means. If nothing else, Christmas means that God wants to be near you, to be with you, to share his life with you, to share his love with you, and that God, in Christ, has gone to infinite lengths to make this possible, coming all the way from heaven to earth and then, once on earth, going all the way from the manger to the cross. God doesn't want to be an idea in your mind, or even a powerful, distant force you bow down to. At the center of God's heart is love. Relationship is what God desires with us, even intimacy. That's what Christmas means!

This is the reason John makes his testimony. Again, **“We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”** This life, this relationship, is possible *now*. We can participate today in the life of God in Christ and share that life with one another. Not just back then, but now.

The other day I had an experience I've had many times before. I began the day reading the Bible and seeking God in prayer. And in those first moments of that otherwise ordinary morning I met Christ. Not in a physical sense. Jesus didn't walk up and sit down next to me. But it was no less real. Some of the words in the scripture I was reading nearly jumped off the page as they spoke into the circumstances of my life in meaningful and relevant ways. I sensed God's voice, both comforting and challenging. That's what happened. I admit I can't prove it to you, but it is nonetheless my testimony that on that morning I had fellowship with the living God.

At other times in my life I have seen Christ heal people, both in their bodies and in their minds and hearts. I have been a part of far too many wild circumstances which I cannot explain away as coincidental. I have found real hope in the midst of hardship, an ability to love and forgive which I know is not natural to me, joy even in the midst of sadness, understanding of truth I know cannot be credited simply to my intelligence. So along with John I declare to you these things so that you may also experience them, that you would truly know the shared life that God, in Christ, came at Christmas to bring us all. And I know I'm not alone. How many of you could offer a similar testimony, that in your life you have actually experienced the fellowship of God in Christ in a real way?

Such testimony is not suggestion or advice. It is declaration, which means that it demands a response. It's the difference between, on the one hand, seeking to entertain or inspire you with a wild story about an elephant who got out of its cage one day and wandered through the neighborhood and, on the other hand, seeking to move you by declaring to you that there really is, in fact, an elephant out front on the lawn.

So here is the testimony meant to *move* you. The Living God has come near in Christ, nearer than you probably realize. This was John's testimony, and when people in his day believed it, there was completeness to his joy. . . It's the same with me. Nothing could bring me more joy this Christmas Eve than to know that even one of you will walk out of here and, perhaps for the first time, at least consider that this testimony actually might be true.

Amen.