

John 1:1-18
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“All-In-God”

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Many residents of Southeast Wisconsin turn to the weekly publication known as the Shepherd Express when they want to know what is happening in Milwaukee. The newspaper contains movie and restaurant reviews, festival and live music listings, theater previews and more for the person who wants to get out and experience what Milwaukee has to offer.

In St. Louis, where I went to Seminary, a similar weekly entertainment paper is called, “The Riverfront Times.” And when I lived there we students would rush from our dorms after Wednesday classes to pick up the new copy. We sought low budget events for the coming weekend which would help us relax from our challenging studies in Church, theology, Bible and Religion.

In addition to the movies, live music, theater, and other listings one of my favorite weekly features of the Riverfront Times was called “The Big Picture.” It was a large, full page photograph reflecting some aspect of life in St. Louis, often a depiction of something from the underside of life in the city. What I really liked about this feature was there were no articles, no captions on the pictures. The photograph simply stood on its own. I would turn to this page and find a picture of poor woman, or another week a homeless child and wonder -- Was the facial expression of the poor woman reflecting contentedness, or defeat? Was the posture of a homeless child reflecting satisfaction because he didn't know any better or resolve because he figured this is all there is? Here a picture truly was worth a thousand words.

If you attended Confirmation class, or even Sunday school, you may have heard a term used to describe one characteristic of God; Transcendent. Transcendence refers to the big picture of God's nature and power which is mysterious; beyond human words, or idea, or thoughts. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead described the world as God's body, suggesting how far the mystery of God is beyond our limited knowledge. The funny thing about trying to describe God's transcendence is it is the very aspect of God that make God beyond any human description.

Still, God's transcendence allows us to speak of God as present around the world at the same moment. A God able to express love to everyone and everything. The God whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and whose weakness is stronger than human strength. This is the God which can tear down walls of division, and transform hatred into love. This is the God which invites all to salvation. This is the God of the miraculous and the impossible. This is the God that gives us hope for justice when it seems unattainable. You may remember lyrics to a Bette' Midler song years ago, “God is watching us, from a distance;” that's the Transcendent God, captured in favorite hymns like, “How Great Thou Art.”

This is the God we meet in the beginning of our birth story from the Gospel of John. “In the beginning was the Logos, and the logos was with God and the Logos was God.” Logos is God's

Word, God's wisdom. Philosopher Heraclitus first used the word "logos" 500 years before Jesus was born, trying to describe a "first Principle of order and knowledge." But is this "big mystery" all there is to God?

I think there is something missing if we only understand God as Transcendence. We might become tempted to try to "hide" our little flaws from this big God. What with "that horrible government in Syria, or that combative presidential campaign going on, surely God isn't spending too much time noticing my little flaws because of the enormous ugliness somewhere else.

Another drawback to understanding God only as transcendent. One of the many drawbacks is... it is impossible to have a truly mutual, covenantal relationship with a God which, in God's grandness and detachedness, barely needs us if at all. So as we continue the celebration of Jesus' birth on this second Sunday in Christmas, the gospel of John tells us this "logos," became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.

In Confirmation class, Sunday school, or other studies you may have heard this side of God described as: Immanence. This is the God who is close and personal. The one that goes to bed with us at night and wakes up with us in the morning. The one who the bumper sticker proclaims is "my Co-pilot." This is the God who is right there in the muck of life with us. We can't hide from the immanent aspect of God.

This is the God which cries when we cry, sings when we sing, and screams when we scream. This is the God which hurts at the site of injustice and plants seeds of peace in our unrest. This is the God disappointed in our failures and shortcomings. The God which weaves hope into our despair. This is God-with-us, Emmanuel. Described in songs like this international favorite, "Siyahamba, e-ku-kha-nyen-kwen khos, Caminando en la luz de dios, We are Walking in the Light of God, we are walking in the light of God."

During much of my older childhood a question baffled me. How do we understand God as both mystery and personal? Isn't that two gods which would break the first commandment to have "no other gods before YHWH?"

Our story today provides insight. The mysterious, detached, God of logos decided to become flesh – was born in order to experience the brokenness of humanity first hand, to be present with each living creature and every part of nature. To accompany us, to ally with us, to give us new life.

We may picture this process of God moving into our neighborhood as God breaking into our day to day world with the good news. As if the logos has come down to earth from some distant place and in Christ has joined in relationship with us, becoming one of us.

But what if in Jesus' birth something else has happened. What if Jesus' birth reveals that instead of God coming to us, we, all the created order actually reside in God. Theology

teachers us the term Panentheism (I didn't say pantheism which is the idea that everything is its own god, creating a world with many gods) Panentheism translated means, "All-in-God," what if Jesus' birth has shown us how all of life and creation constantly resides in God. What if as Whitehead suggests the fullness of creation is held within God's body.

Instead of being somewhere else and "breaking" into our world to save us when the logos decides to. What if God is understood as the soul of the universe, the universal spirit, and God holds everyone and everything within the divine being.

This could have some interesting implications. It would suggest that the earth shattering, hatred breaking, wall shattering, justice flowing, life transforming power of God is around us all the time. It places us in the womb of a hope weaving, seeds of peace planting God. It embeds us within God who makes the impossible, possible. All-in-God makes the full power of God available like an umbilical cord. It means there is always light around us, there is always hope to feed us.

John's gospel reflects this when the author writes, "all things came into being through God, and without God not one thing came into being. What has come into being through God was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

So as we near the end of this sermon please understand I am not drawing a line between right and wrong, but I want to invite all of us to think about the implications of living and moving and having our being in God. What would it mean for my addiction if the instant power of God's strength is around me all the time? What would it mean for my greed, if the full satisfaction of God's love is constantly present? How might I handle fear, or worries if the fullness of God's courage and hope are right here? What would it mean for my self-centeredness if God's call to service is all around?

If you have always pictured God as residing far away and breaking into our world in an almost random sort of way... I invite you to ponder... what if the fullness of God's power and love and forgiveness are already here, all around us, all the time. What if we, along with all we see, hear, smell, taste, hear, feel and know, what if all of creation is permanently stationed within God.

And what if our role is not to watch for God to break in, but to lay bare our minds and hearts to God's encompassing, transforming Spirit; to reach out inviting God into our fears, and addictions and other problems personally and socially; risking vulnerability, and allowing our head AND our heart to lay open to the Spirit who is all around us; ready to guide, comfort, and challenge us if we would just allow our guard down for even a moment. Just think!!

Amen