

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
First Sunday after Christmas Day
Sunday, December 29, 2024**

**“And the Word Was God”
John 1:1-14**

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Some years ago, a friend of mine, a minister, attended a Christmas carol service at a church. He was seated way in the back, incognito: no one knew he was clergy. At the end of the carol service, the minister of the church stepped out and pronounced a benediction: “May God grant you the peace and joy of Christmas.”

A man sitting next to my friend leaned over to him said, “Ugh, do they have to drag religion into everything?” I mean, really: the nerve! Why can’t we Christians just sing songs about the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ without “dragging religion into it”? Well, this morning, I’m going to explore the words of one particular Christmas carol; but I feel I should warn you, I am going to drag religion into this!

Christmas carols usually tell the story of Christmas with concrete details. “While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground” (Tate); “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed”; “Once in royal David’s city stood a lowly cattle shed” (Alexander). But there’s one familiar Christmas carol where the language is very different—and that’s “Oh come, all ye faithful,” which was our Processional Carol on Christmas Eve.

Instead of earthy language about cribs and cattle sheds, we sing: “God of God, Light of light, born unto Mary, the virgin blest, very God, begotten, not created” (Wade). The language is poetic—but it’s also abstract, even philosophical. Instead of a baby in the hay, it’s “Light of light,” “begotten, not created.” So where does this language come from? It turns out, the story behind these words is more complex than you probably expect—but it’s also a story that leads us right into the hope of Christmas.

The version of “Oh come, all ye faithful” that we’re familiar with was penned by a nineteenth-century Anglican minister, Frederick Oakely, who translated it from Latin into English. Now the Latin version, “Adeste, Fidelis,” (also known as the Bing Crosby version!) is usually attributed to John Francis Wade, who included in his carol this verse about “Light of light” and “begotten, not created.” However, he didn’t actually come up with this language, which is far older than the carol itself.

In worship in the Presbyterian Church, we recite the Apostles’ Creed, which is an ancient statement of Christian faith—but it’s not the only one. The Presbyterian Church also affirms what’s called the Nicene Creed, another ancient statement of Christian faith, which the early church adopted way back in the fourth century. And part of the Nicene Creed goes like this:
“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,

*God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father” (BCO).*

When we sing, “God of God, Light of light [...], very God, begotten not created,” “Oh come, all ye faithful” is quoting the Nicene Creed. So whenever we hear this carol, whether it’s right here on Christmas Eve, or played at the drug store in, like, October—we’re hearing the Nicene Creed, an ancient Christian statement of faith, translated from Greek to Latin to English, and set to music. That peculiar verse of “Oh come, all ye faithful” comes to us all the way from a creed written seventeen hundred years ago.

But that’s still not the end of this story. In fact, I think this is where the story gets really interesting! A question to ask is, well, why was the Nicene Creed written in the first place? What was going on when the early church described Jesus in these specific terms as “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ)? As it turns out, the Nicene Creed included this language in order to correct a very specific misconception about Jesus.

There was a Christian, born in the third century [Arius], who began teaching that Christ was not actually God but was just a very special person (who, like the rest of us, had been created by God): this teaching claimed that Christ was not one with God and did not really know God either (cf. Leith, McKim). Basically, this teaching claimed that Christ was an extraordinary person, but not divine—meaning that, in the manger, it was not God who came to dwell among us.

And as this teaching began circulating around, the early church felt that this was not simply misguided—but that this misunderstanding of Jesus was profoundly damaging to the central hope of the Christian faith. So, in an effort to make clear that God had dwelt among us in Jesus, the Nicene Creed reasserted that Christ was fully divine, fully God, God’s very self; that it was God, born of Mary, who came to dwell as a human among us; that in Christ we meet “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made.”

But that leads to another question: what made the early church so certain that, in Christ, God had really dwelt in our midst? That takes us back even further; here’s where the story reaches all the way back to the New Testament, including our Scripture Lessons this morning. This is the biblical witness that inspired the church to reaffirm that, in Christ, the fullness of God has come to dwell among us (Colossians 1:19), that—as St. Paul put it—“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

“[I]n these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds,” we heard in our Epistle Lesson. “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (v. 3). “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” we heard in our Gospel Lesson. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory

as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (vv. 1, 14). It's passages like these that testified to God dwelling with us in Christ, such that to meet Christ is to meet God.

Now I've told this story backwards, right—from the words we sang on Christmas Eve back to the Nicene Creed and further back to the New Testament itself. But now I think you can see how all this unfolded. The writings of the New Testament declared that, in Christ, God himself was present with us. And in this central claim of our faith, the church discovered the heart of the Christian hope—rejoicing that God, out of love for us all, had chosen to live and die as a human being.

But after a couple of hundred years, this all started to get muddled and confused when a teaching circulated—treating Jesus like merely a remarkable person, and nothing more; and as that confusion threatened to deprive the church of its central hope, the church responded by reaffirming in a creed that Christ was God with us—with language that, centuries later, would be woven into a beloved Christmas carol.

It's quite a story, isn't it? It's a story that involves a Christmas carol and a debate in the early church and an ancient confession of faith and the writings of the New Testament... But the whole story hinges on this insistence about what's really at the centre of the Christian hope—that God's grace and kindness has been revealed to us in Christ, in whom God dwelt with us, in whom God chose—out of love—to share with us in all our struggles and joys.

That distinctive verse in "Oh come, all ye faithful" is the legacy of centuries of Christian witness to this hope—and now, whenever we sing that carol, we become heirs of a hope that has been passed down to us from the earliest days of the church until today. May we then continue to find hope knowing that the Saviour Christ, who has shared in the fullness of human experience, is "God of God, Light of light, born unto Mary, the virgin blest, very God, begotten, not created." Amen.