

## *In Unlikely Company*

Peter JB Carman, January 2, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church

### *Jeremiah 31:7-14*

- 31:7 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."  
31:8 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.  
31:9 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.  
31:10 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."  
31:11 For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.  
31:12 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.  
31:13 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.  
31:14 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*

- 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
1:2 He was in the beginning with God.  
1:3 All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being  
1:4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.  
1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.  
1:6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.  
1:7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.  
1:8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.  
1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.  
1:10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
yet the world did not know him.  
1:11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.  
1:12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name,  
he gave power to become children of God,  
1:13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man,  
but of God.  
1:14 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.  
1:15 (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.'")  
1:16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.  
1:17 The law indeed was given through Moses;  
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.  
1:18 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.

*In the beginning*—so begins the book of Genesis, at the very start of the bible as it describes creation: the spirit passing across the face of the deep, light and darkness, oceans and land spun into being out of the formless void. *In the beginning*: so begins the Gospel of John as it describes creation anew, the coming of One whose spirit, it daringly claims, has been with God since the very beginning of all things, One “without [whom] not one thing came into being.”

Mark starts his account of the Good News of Jesus with a voice in the wilderness and the baptism of Jesus. Matthew and Luke start their stories with the birth of a child in Bethlehem in the land of Judea. But John's Gospel starts by looking back into the misty dawn of time itself, at the beginning of the very first *new year*—finding there the same Spirit that has filled the One whose story he is about to tell. John finds the very Reason for Being in the arrival of Christ—and looking back across the

millennia is able to perceive that everything was leading up to this moment, that this is the One who can make sense of everything, who gives light to our life, who is our Life....

***In the beginning***—we gather here at the beginning of a new year, on a day when a friend of mine who has a church in New York City is offering free alka seltzer to the first 36 people to arrive. So many of us like to finish the old year a little madly, as we make promises to be more reasonable in the one about to begin. We are full of resolve, glad to get rid of what is no more, glad to find some hope in what is about to be.

At about 11 on New Year's Eve, our neighbors from next door came over, bringing some pretty fine sparkling cider, and some still warm pumpkin pudding, as yet uncut. As we sat around a candlelit dining room table, straining to keep our eyes open till Midnight, Zach, who is thirteen and went through his Bar Mitzvah earlier this year, spotted my family's old Dutch bible just behind me. He wanted to know what it was. As the minutes ticked toward the New Year, I was showing him this old book, printed in 1702. I opened it to the beginning. It said there, only in Dutch, "*In the beginning, when God created the universe,<sup>2</sup> the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water.*"

Zach was in awe of a book so old. He loved the metal clasps. His mother said to him: "Just like the Torah scroll—you don't need to touch it!" Despite our different faiths, he and I shared a common text, in different languages. And it wasn't until the next morning that it occurred to me that there could have been no better way to start the New Year and end the old one, than to open a 300 year old bible to the story we share of the beginning of time, together with someone who is just beginning his walk of faith. And no, it wasn't planned. A good moment, maybe even a God moment.

At the beginning of this New Year, somehow the echoes of the first creation, the sense of brand new possibility, the passing of an old order and the beginning of a new one, it can all still catch us for a few passing moments. Many of us are, truth be told, still looking for a reason for being, still looking for the Word, still chasing a distant starlight we do not fully understand. And yet we have a sense deep down within us, that there is a Reason, there is a Word, there is a Light whose power is undiminished, and whose way calls us still. Like the Zoroastrian priests called the Magi, crossing into Bethlehem by way of Jerusalem, we may be searching for something we don't understand—but we believe that it makes all the difference in the world to go searching for it where the light leads, where the Truth beckon, where Hope lies.

***In the beginning***. On the night that begins a new year, it seems that people will willingly go and join in a party with all of humanity! Whether in the streets of New York City, or in their own living rooms, humanity is willing to put aside its usual divisions and simply celebrate—even if it does seem a little forced on occasion! As they watch a shiny ball descend, or as in my neighborhood, light sparklers—or (so it sounds) shoot their guns, folk are willing to be in some strange company... in unlikely company.

As we gather at this open communion table today, young and old, members and friends, and hopefully a few of you who are visiting for the first time, I confess that sometimes I have a hard time relating to the dropping balls and the glitz and the glamour. I like the pumpkin pudding that Dave and Jennifer from next door brought over better. I like the kind of hope that the prophet Jeremiah gives voice to in his hopes for the joyful return of a scattered people to the holy mountain of God. I like the kind of hope of a group of Magi looking for the light of God in a backwater town. I like the kind of hope that is represented when we dip our bread in the common clay cup that represents Christ's love poured out for the forgiveness and reconciliation of all the earth. I like the thought that all over this world, today followers of Jesus are breaking bread together, and reading the words: "In the beginning..." That's the kind of Reason for Being I long for.

As we begin this New Year, there is one thing I want to hold onto from New Year's Eve. And that is the readiness to live with my fellow human beings, regardless of shape or size, national origin, wealth, race, gender, orientation—you get it—the whole messy strangeness and diversity of what it means to be us humans. For we, so often unholy in our divided and warring ways, are all the beloved children of God.

I suppose there is something about starting a new year that causes musing about one's own distant past. Mine is a little different from many of yours; my earliest memories are from small towns and cities in India, my first language one I can no longer speak. But it isn't just your deceptively American looking minister. Many of us have come a long way to this sanctuary to be together today—we have had folks worshipping with us this Christmas who came all the way from Indonesia, and from Cambodia, to be with this community. And I suspect we have with us here this morning some who have traveled much further spiritually although they may have come from just around the corner geographically.

As we begin 2011, as we come to the communion table together, young and not-so young, may we revel in the unlikely company we keep. May we sense the Logos, the Reason for Being, the Word that became flesh, may we sense it strong among us. May it bring us together, unlikely traveling companions. May we taste the kind of hope that cannot be taken away, as we eat together and drink together. May we be strengthened for the Work of Christmas that lies in the year ahead. And may we walk in the light of God, the light that is life, and that cannot be taken away, no matter how it seems to flicker, or goes unseen.

Amen.