

Christmas Day 2018

John 1: 1-14

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

67-year-old Dr. William “Lynn” Weaver is the chief of surgery at Fayetteville VA Medical Center in North Carolina. In 1964 at the age of 14 he was one of 14 black students sent to a previously all-white school in Knoxville, TN. He told NPR’s Story Corps his tale of difficult days, being part of the first wave of integration. Even his teachers told him daily that he didn’t belong. They’d hover over him during test-taking, yell “Time’s up!” and tear the test right out of his hand. A bright kid, he flunked every class his first marking period at West High School and was well on the way to convincing himself not only that he didn’t belong there, but that he was stupid, after all.

Word of Lynn’s precarious situation traveled through the grapevine to his old school, where he had excelled and was remembered, valued, loved. One night his 7<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher, Mr. Hill, stopped by the house. He invited his former student to swing by his junior high after school each day, and on Saturday mornings for tutoring. Lynn gratefully accepted. Mr. Hill and other teachers coached him until he succeeded in classwork once again and regained his confidence. Even with good grades, he still didn’t “merit” a welcome at West High. No teacher, no guidance counselor spoke with him about college – so he was very surprised his senior year to get a letter from Howard University saying he was being granted a scholarship to attend. He accepted, completed his undergraduate work and went on to finish medical school as well.

Years later at his brother’s funeral Dr. Weaver saw Mr. Hill, his old science teacher, again. In conversation, he said to him,

‘You know, Mr. Hill, if I had not gotten that scholarship I don’t know what would have happened. And I don’t know how I got the scholarship because I never even applied for it’ ....

Mr. Hill then explained, “I applied for you.” The moral of that story, in Dr. Weaver’s words?

“So Mr. Hill stepped in and, I believe, saved my life” ...

"And that's the ignorance of youth and the wisdom of age. When you look back on it you say, 'How did I get here? How did I make it?' Because people helped you, whether you knew it or not" ....<sup>1</sup>

People, and **God**, most of all, have helped us, whether we know it or not.

**How** has God helped?

*God so **loved** the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

Our Gospel this Christmas morning isn't populated by shepherds, angels, or farm animals – there's not even **the slightest** mention of Joseph, Mary or a Baby! But St. John, poetic soul that he was, exposes the heart of Christmas:

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us... (John1:14, NRSV)*

*The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood. (John 1:14, The Message)*

Here's another story, about a king who'd always slip the leash of his security detail and wander alone off the royal property, nearly giving a heart attack to the people charged with keeping him safe. **"Why do you do it??"** they asked with equal measures of concern and frustration. He answered, "I cannot rule my people unless I know how they live."<sup>2</sup> Our Lord came among us and knows how we live. 'Knows **us**, warts and all. 'Gave all, for us.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, son of Mary, came to save us from our sin. Remember what the angel commanded Joseph in a dream? "...[Y]ou are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21b) Our Lord Jesus came to make us safe, for eternity. But someone has written,

For those who believe in God, it means, this birth, that God himself is never safe from us, and maybe that is the dark side of Christmas....<sup>3</sup>

Our God-who-became-human opened Himself up to the indignity of diapers, skinned knees, acne, headaches and the common cold. He made Himself a target for the laughter of the people who thought it ridiculous that he would say Jairus' daughter was dead, not sleeping. He became the object of the wrath of his Nazarene neighbors who wanted to throw Him off a cliff after He preached in the synagogue there.

Worst of all, our Lord made Himself vulnerable to the murderous rejection of the religious leaders who had waited so long for a Messiah and then crucified Him.

*The Message* version of today's Christmas Gospel includes this:

*But whoever **did** want him  
 who believed he was who he claimed  
 and would do what he said,  
 He made to be their true selves,  
 their child-of-God selves...  
 We all live off his generous bounty,  
 gift after gift after gift. (John 1:12, 16)*

We don't always recognize the gift, don't always realize "We got to where we are because Somebody (with a capital S) has helped us." When we **do** recognize and realize that, though, we say "Thank You" by recognizing the presence of the Christ in the last, the lost and the least, whom He calls "members of My family." (Matthew 25:42) We open ourselves up to being earth angels to others, as Mr. Edward Hill was to William "Lynn" Weaver, a black teen with a bleak future apart from the love and concern of a teacher who gave a great gift anonymously and kept it secret for decades.

I'll close with this Christmas verse by a mystic-poet named Angelus Silesius. He lived 400 years ago but speaks a timeless truth:

"If Christ were born a thousand times  
 in Galilee,  
 it is all in vain  
 until he is born  
 in me."

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> "People Helped You, Whether You Knew It Or Not," StoryCorps, August 25, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (rev. ed., *Daily Study Bible Series*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), p. 14.

