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"Surprised by a Word" The Rev. Garrett Lane (12/31/2023, First Sunday after Christmas)

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight.
O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Preaching after Christmas is generally a good time.
The few, the proud, the strong are here. We've had a lot of church this past week,
and it's a good thing. And so, yeah, I just want to recognize that. Look around,
pat each other on the back. No, we don't need to do that. But we've been talking a lot,
leading up to Christmas about Advent, about waiting for the coming of Christ.
And last Sunday, we celebrated Christmas. Christ is here. Christ is here. And Advent brings us
as we're waiting for Christmas to happen. It's a mixture of relief that we know is impending.
God will be here soon. But also, I would say, and as we heard today in John, in the gospel of John,
a little bit of fear about who God is. We'd like to say we know who God is. We hear who God is
on Sundays, but there's still this sense, or at least I have this sense, of impending fear.
And it's not this relief that comes with ordering all your gifts six months in advance for your
family, or this dread fear that you might have. I don't know if you've had this fear.
You're standing at a target clearance rack. It's like December 23rd, and you're just like looking
for anything at this point in time. There's a fear there, but that's not the fear that John has.
It's a fear that we are unsure about who this God is, and this relief that God is coming into the
world. But our waiting in Advent is over. Christ is here. God has come into our world, and John
tells us a story that is not like the regular nativity scene. His

emphasis is a little different. But before we get there, I want to show you some nativity scenes and some scenes of the incarnation that have been depicted in Christian iconography. So the incarnation, Jesus has both fully God and fully human, gets depicted in religious artwork. And so you can kind of see this light coming from heaven. We heard about the light that John talks about, Christ bringing the light of the world and life. We have Mary holding Jesus here. We have this nativity scene, which is a little hard to see. I like how the donkey and the ox are right in the middle of this one. They kind of, from far away, they hit my eye. But we also see there's still lights coming down, a star coming down towards Mary and towards Jesus. So we see that reflected in John as well. And I like this one especially. So underneath Mary and underneath Jesus is this kind of like flowing of light that is stretching out beyond the image. And I like how this ties in with our gospel reading of John today. So I'm going to leave this one up as we continue. The first chapter of John is not the typical nativity Christmas scene. It is not this tidy narrative that Luke has talking about Elizabeth, talking about Jesus' family. It is not this, like Matthew has in the gospel of Matthew, how Jesus might be this successor king to Israelite royalty. Saint John writes, and it is very poetic. It's very ethereal. It's different. And you either love it or you hate it. I will say that. You either really like the gospel of John or you're like, nope, not for me. And that's okay. We have multiple opinions here at church. If you came to our lessons in Carol's service this year, the title of this reading is Saint John unfolds the mystery of the incarnation, which sounds really metal, really cool. Like some quest was given to John and he finds this thing and he's like unfolding it for people to see. This great big story. And if you were a person to just open up your Bible for the very first time and just start reading, John chapter 1 verse 1, it might sound like a bunch of gibberish. It might sound a little strange. It trying to come to this with completely new eyes. John makes grandiose and sweeping claims about creation, grace, truth, how Jesus comes from the heart of God and cares for humanity. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. John exposes us to this opening prologue, this beauty, this poetic

beauty that is found in few other places in the New Testament. John is in some ways a poet right here. He is introducing us to Christ who is the Word of God. And just in this first verse, he's tapping in to another passage, which if you opened up your Bible to the very beginning, in Genesis, it also starts with the beginning. And God speaks in that beginning. So this God who speaks at the beginning of Genesis and the word now comes and is made flesh in John's gospel, he's saying something. He's making these call backs to holy scripture. God speaks. And Christ the Word is here. And John begins by telling us that Christ is this Word of God. The one that we have heard from Genesis, the one that we have heard from Isaiah and from the Psalm today, you have heard probably the phrase that talk is cheap. Talk is cheap. Words might be cheap as well. We use words all day long. Some of us speak more than others. We talk to our friends, to our employees, to our family, to our co-workers, to students, to preachers, to priests. We apologize. We dress down. We explain. We excuse. We do all sorts of things with words. Much of my work in life is reading words. You probably send emails and texts, even if you're not talking out loud. And all of these words, and all of these words get used, it's not just the words, it's the tone, right? Lawyers, attorneys, salespeople are really focused on the tone of the words that come out. I practice this before I get up here and talk to you guys. Isn't that crazy? But I do that. And it's because I would like to hear myself. I would like to know how my words are being used and how they might be interpreted. We use words all the time. And this doesn't even touch on the exponential increase of words that we have with the advent of the internet, where words are counted, where they're analyzed, where they're promoted, to deliver maximum effect. It's like when you see an ad maybe on your phone, and you've been talking about this item that maybe you're interested in, and then you're like, oh, I'm seeing an ad for this, and I don't think that I have ever typed it into Google or looked it up, but I was talking to someone about it. These words are picked up on, bound up, and spat out for individualized marketing and material, and there are so many of them. And so when words are so plentiful, when we have so many words, what is one more word? When the single effect of one

word is so diluted, where is the place for the word of God? To humanity, to us, the word of God is not just one more word. The word Jesus Christ sits at the beginning of creation and the end of all things, not a cheap word. The word of God is revelation, God appearing to us. Revelation that we have been invited to become children of God, that we have been adopted into the family of God, that the transforming love of Christ actually changes us. It's a revelation that the creator is here present to his creatures, and the creator does not come with empty hands, but brings light and life, as verse 4 in John says. The revealing of God, the revealing of this God, this word, this first and last word that has appeared is born among us and is here, is a cause for joy. And the nature of Jesus Christ's arrival, God arriving as a human, as a baby, fully God, fully human, it produces a sense of joy. Think about times in your own life where you've been moved to joy. Real joy, not just like I'm feeling good today, but joy. For some, it might be walking around in piney woods and hiking, it might be out in nature. For some, it might be like contagious belly laughter from friends and family that have come from far off and sitting at a table together. For some, it could be on a road trip hearing your favorite song come on the radio and just jamming out, screaming the lyrics. And for some, you see this surprising that happens. Oh, joy is here. I'm laughing now. I see it with children, specifically with my nieces, and you don't have to be a fisherman to kind of know this, but if you take children fishing, how have you taken children fishing before? I'm curious, actually. If you've taken children fishing, there's a sense of like this fish is nasty, right? It's slimy. But once they get over that, there's kind of this like giggling that happens. This joy that happens as they're holding this rainbow trout for the first time and it's shiny and it's new and it's this beautiful little thing. We're surprised by joy in the words of C.S. Lewis. And all of these instances of beauty remain in our minds for years to come. It's why we go to the same beach that we've always gone to and we still take photos of the sunset, even though that the beach is the same every single day and the sun will set on the beach every single day. But you still take photos and post it on Instagram or Facebook, right? Because it's beautiful,

because it speaks to us and it surprises
us even though we know that it's still coming. And in the same way, we
are surprised by the message
of Christ that he brings to us every Christmas. Most of the year, it
sits in the back of our heads.
Yes, salvation, love, all that mess, sure. But on holy days, like
Christmas, we really experience
this joy that the message of the word of God has for us, the one that
has lived among us and
that shows us that true life rests in Christ. We are surprised by this
message that the word brings
because all around us, life is offered if we could just have that one
thing beyond our reach,
that house, that salary, that life in another town, that major. If I
just switch my major,
things would be good, that car, that perfect family. The message,
though, that the word brings to us
is that true life does exist and flourishes and grows into something
beautiful in Christ,
the word made flesh. And he is here with us. He has come to become
human. Christ is the messenger
and the message. The message is that the word has become flesh and
dwelt amongst us
and that we have seen him full of grace and full of truth, that he
brings true life,
that light comes from Christ and that we are invited into
participation in this work with Christ,
because he has lifted for us what we are able to lift for ourselves.
The word of God does not
merely bring knowledge, does not merely bring us a laundry list of
things we check off or agree to.
Christ brings himself and his life. A beautiful light that is shines
in darkness and the darkness
does not overcome him. We are surprised every Christmas by this word.
We are shocked and we are
surprised into joy and love. The word that was at the beginning of
creation will make all things new
at the end of time. God becomes human so that we might have true life
in him and that is good,
enjoyous news from John today. Amen. Let us pray. Holy Lord, we thank
you for your son. We thank you
for the life and the word that he brings to us. Open our ears to hear
your word and your son's
only name we pray. Amen.