

What a year, blessed friends. And the happiest of Christmastide's to all.

I want to talk about the Gospel. But an obvious and inadequate summary of a thick year seems apropos, so that we do not lightly consider the import of grace on this eve.

We acknowledge, tonight, renewed global suffering on a scale that perhaps never went away, but which is presented afresh in ways unsettling even to my own children in the daily news. Unrest and killing to a degree that makes the sixth-grade math worksheet appear momentarily meaningless amidst it all. Is this a time—right now, a child is tempted to think—to prove my mathematical enough-ness when others my age fight for their next meal? Their next breath? Is my next mortgage payment worth it, when others have no home? Should I crank the heat up an extra degree this winter, when others have no fuel for their next fire as they fight in the winter months around the globe? Does religion have anything beyond mere well-wishing, when peace is never fully realized for children around the world? Is the world so broken that it's beyond repair? How long should I fight for the preservation of *Catcher in the Rye* on the reading booklist if we cannot even agree to geopolitical treaties that preserve a certain readership? These are the questions that many bring to John chapter 1; to Hebrews chapter 1; to Psalm 98 and to Isaiah 52. Each of these authors knew death as an unsolicited companion as do you and me. So why do they preach hope? So many otherwise find nothing but despair, and therefore cast their doubts on those who aspire to love.

It would seem that biographers and Gospel-writers of 1st century Palestine have the same concern. In a culture that could not promise them royalties for a rad memoir; and in a culture that guaranteed their martyrdom—they still wrote. For us. If immediate personal gain is clearly off the table as a motivator, then why did they conduct their interviews, inscribe their experiences, and claim world-creating love as their sole concern?? My first inclination, because of the overwhelming gift that they have given even to my family, is to believe them! Oh to believe them! They must've written because of an overwhelming conviction that it was all true! OH, I want the truth. I want it when I wake up and make breakfast for 8 at 6am. Or when I find that one night a week when all eight of us can be together. Or when I enter this nave to bury the faithful in that columbarium. I want to tell the truth in those moments of LIFE FULLY KNOWN and LIFE FULLY DESCRIBED. Enter John. He knows Bethlehem. He knows Mary personally—she was entrusted to him. When he put pen to paper or blade to velum, it was because he and Blessed Mary had discussed the nature of Jesus a billion times over soup and sourdough. “in the beginning was the Word.” Before a single galaxy had been given creative utterance, they knew who the child in the stable was—God Almighty. “and the Word was with God” writes John who knew Mary as his own mother. “And the Word WAS God” wrote John who knew Mary as his own mother. He appropriates the language of Genesis to tell a story that predates Genesis. He knew his Bible, and then he concludes the same Bible. He knew the God of Israel, and then he clarifies the forever God of Israel. Whatever you might draw from the Scriptures thus far—know this, writes John—that the conclusions must be filtered through the fullest, four-Gospel account of Jesus. To know Jesus is to know the Father. To know Jesus, therefore, is to know the final and fullest nature of love itself. Love is not a feeling, though it

gives rise to many. Love is a reality. It created everything. It alone gives rise to science, politics, parenting, inter-faith dialogue, dog park fencing, and school rent-agreements. It drips from the page that gives final diagnoses; it soaks into the reality of the ink that forms sentences on my seven-year old's attempt to master the English language. It smiles, this love, when we inquire as to our calling and meaning in life—for it alone shapes both. And at its core is sacrifice; like, love, or hate it. That part of reality is unchangeable—like love itself. It will leave behind the privileges of dynamic deity to become a diaper-laden baby. It will leave behind the privileges of dynamic deity to allow awkward nails to pierce flesh on a cross.

Here is the engine room of the entire Gospel.

But this love has an outworking. Hebrews quotes the OT in reminding us about the *Oil of Gladness*. I talk about this part every year. I cling to it.

God has anointed that little baby with a death-sentence with 'the oil of gladness.' Quite a lot bound up in that word 'gladness', but let's take it to a very straightforward level: gladness—contentedness—is found in a donkey-cave tonight. The oil of gladness is not to be found on the other side of finally paying off your credit card debt. The oil of gladness is not to be found on the other side of finally driving a car where every single thing is fixed and working at the same time. The oil of gladness is not even found in finally receiving your invite to the right Christmas party at the house with 3 Christmas trees. The oil of gladness is flowing over and out of Jesus tonight. He's the happy one. He is your happiness. He holds the scepter that proves him King. He holds the scepter that grants eternal blessedness, which is to say, eternal happiness. Stop sweating this life and look to the God with ten fingers named Jesus.

Leaving us now with the church of Jesus—he is now forever in this world—a world, which, from anyone looking from the outside, would seem transfixed upon ceaseless war alone.

We need the one Church of Jesus, right now. And we have it.

“The church is a body of people redeemed by Jesus Christ who are caught up in the life of God, not a social service organization. Still, one would think that life would make it uniquely equipped to bring oxygen to the starved arteries of contemporary life: concerned about how little we seem to understand each other across class and cognition, generation and politics? The church of the ten-fingered God, in theory, should break down such walls. Concerned about artificial intelligence and a technological age spinning rapidly out of our grasp? The church, in theory, should keep us grounded in sacred rhythms, embodied relationships, a robust moral imagination, the stuff that keeps us human and reminds us that God remains God. Concerned about the overpoliticization and undermoralization of our public life? The church, in theory, should be cultivating leaders sensitized to the lines between good and evil. Concerned about a culture that sets up irredeemable battles between friend and foe? The church, in theory, should have what it takes to model how we respond to our enemies in love. Its as if the church is the missing puzzle piece for precisely this moment.” – Anne Snyder

The church is the only place given authority by God to take us through the journey from guilt to healing, from sin to freedom. Let's follow baby Jesus this year. When God became man, the sacralization of all matter, and of all feelings, and of all consciousness, and of all suffering became a permanent reality. Sacralization simply means it is forever sacred and God-haunted. Entropy cannot win. Death cannot win. Wars cannot solve. Money is a caricature. You are now heirs not only of God's gifts. You are now heirs not only of God's solutions. You are now heirs not only of God's promises. You are heirs of God. God is the gospel. Suffering is there regardless. The Christian gospel is the only gospel in which God fully enters the dumpster fire with you. You now get God.

The world demands your flesh and blood pound for pound. The Christian gospel alone gives you his flesh and blood pound for pound. And it happens at this altar. You do not receive a partial dose at this altar. You do not receive a mere passing acquaintance at this altar. You receive the entirety of God's perfect grace, so that you can more than survive tomorrow. You can now laugh your way into tomorrow. To fully love is to fully know, and love is poured out right here so that despair is sent crawling back into the shadows where it should remain forever. Alleluia, Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed for us. The ten-fingered God has made all things new.

In the name....