

The World Is About To Turn: Fully Engaged

John 1:1-18

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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The tale of George Bailey and his second-class angel Clarence Oddbody in *It's a Wonderful Life* is one of the most beloved holiday stories of all time; one of a good man with a good family who finds himself in an awful spot on Christmas Eve night in 1945. His company faces bankruptcy and he faces a possible prison sentence for embezzlement; and George faces the reality that he has failed his community of Bedford Falls, his employees at the Building and Loan Bank, his children, his wife and himself. To Clarence he laments, "I wish I had never been born!" Clarence grants George's wish, temporarily. He lets George walk through Bedford Falls to see what the town would be like if he had never been a part of it — if he had never been born. What a difference.

For one, his younger brother, Harry, is not there, because George wasn't there to save him. Had George been born, he would have been with Harry that day at the icy pond and kept him from being submerged in the frigid water. His boss at the drugstore where George worked after school, Mr. Gower, ended up in prison because he accidentally poisoned a sick child by giving him the poison instead of his medicine. Had George been born, he would have noticed the mistake before Mr. Gower had a chance to dispense the drug to the child. Even in the beginning of his life as a school boy, George saved people's lives not because he was trying, but because he was being himself — a kind and loving person who put other's needs before his own. George is convinced that his life has been of negative consequence, but as George's journey with Clarence reveals, his life and his love made many lives — and the whole town — better.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God..." The Gospel of John takes us back to the beginning of God, even before creation, and how God spoke the world into being: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." The fourth evangelist (John) reminds us of God's activity in creation through God's speaking — God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light... God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ... God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." (Genesis 1) God kept speaking until all creation and creatures were made. In the beginning was the Word, the Word with a capital W, the Word that describes God, the Word of action and deed.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This may be one of the most well-known passages of John, or even in the New Testament, but it is one that is least understood. Only in the Prologue of John are God and Jesus described as the Word. This is one of the many unique attributes to this Gospel unlike the three others. John wrote his Gospel between 80 and 100 CE in a particular social and religious context. After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70, the Jewish community had found itself without the center of its culture and therefore struggled to retain its identity. Add to this community a minority of Jews who believe in Jesus and who find themselves persecuted by their community — expelled from their synagogue, which was their religious home.

It is a hard time to be a Jew, but it is an even harder time to be a Jewish Christian. John was one of the Jewish Christians, and he was writing for, and in, a Jewish Christian community that was

in much conflict. The Gospel of John was crafted in response to the struggles and celebrations experienced by his faith community.

It was also crafted by one with knowledge of the Greek philosopher and Jew, Philo. In his writing, Philo used “Word” — in Greek, “Logos” — regularly as a way to describe the creative plan of God that governs the world. John has chosen a term familiar to both Jews and to Greeks when he uses Logos-Word, *but he has used it in a new context with fresh meanings*. In this prologue, the Word of creation becomes also the Word out in the world to reveal God. The Word describes a God of relationship; a God who is not only living in one’s head but also in one’s heart; a God who is encountered.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God engages with humans in transformative ways. God creates the land and its creatures; God parts the Red Sea to enable the chosen people, the Israelites, freedom. God provides manna for God’s people when they are hungry. God gives a set of commandments so they may live full and harmonious lives. And there are covenants with God’s people to build relationship and trust with them and then forgiveness when they inevitably break these covenants. God speaks through prophets to teach the Israelites how to live; to teach them the error of their ways, and to give them instruction for moving forward. Time and time and time again, God relates to the people, loves the people, despite their inability to stay in relationship with their Creator, despite their inability to stay engaged in faithful living.

Ready to end his life, George Bailey has lost his ability to stay engaged in life. For him, seeing his life without him being in it was just what he needed. While we don’t all have the chance to be an unknown observer in our lives, we do all have the opportunity to ask the question: If I were gone, who would notice? Chances are more people than you think. For this congregation is filled with George and Georgia Bailey types who share love and kindness every single day, both to their friends and family and to their neighbors and strangers far away. When that light of God is shined, nothing can extinguish it. Never. And people remember its gleam and warmth for a long while.

During my service on the Commission on Ministry (COM) for the Presbytery, the then Associate Executive Presbyter and now General Assemble co-moderator, Jan Edmiston, would challenge us to take that one question back to our church elders and pastors for whom we served as Commission representatives: “If you were gone, who would notice?”

This question was particularly important given that COM representatives often visit when a church is going through a time of transition — the perfect time to reflect on the church community’s strengths and weaknesses, both in supporting one another and serving the community of which it is a part. Too often churches don’t ask the question: “If you were gone, who would notice?” And the even less often think about the answer.

They get caught up in taking care of themselves. Too often both churches and people don’t think about the reality of the world without them, as George witnesses, and they choose to move through the motions of life rather than to fully engage it.

“If you were gone, who would notice?” This is a question we at Northminster asked a few years ago when we were preparing for our new senior pastor. Our answer was clear: many, many people would notice if Northminster were gone — guests and volunteers at Family Promise NorthShore and at Hemenway Baptist Church Soup at Six, The Night Ministry of Chicago community, the guests at the 2nd Friday Interfaith Action of Evanston Bag Lunch, the men, women and children of The Ember Kenya Grandparents Empowerment Project, Evanston Family

Focus and the families it serves, Hillside Pantry, Curt's Caf , the Monday morning Al-Anon group, Boy Scout Troop 924, and many more.

Northminster was and is engaged in the world. And still, this question of who would notice if we weren't here makes us think and wonder how we might engage in the world in fresh and innovative ways, shining our light of God's love into places of darkness — places like the affordable housing shortage in Evanston, the inability of the city to offer shelter to its homeless unless it is a frigid 15 degrees, and the uncertainty of hundreds of thousands of young adults in the US under the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program as that program ends in March and legislation to enable them to stay has not been passed. There are still many places where God's love gleaming through us is necessary!

"The light shines in the darkness and darkness did not overcome it." Particularly on this Christmas Eve morning, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, it is fitting that we light the candle of love. Love that came down for us! Love that fully engaged with humanity by coming to us as a person: The Word made flesh. Love of a Creator who loves us so much that they come to us in an audible, touchable, seeable way; love made known to us in a way that transforms our hearts as well as our heads; love that wants to know us better.

This passage, and all of the Gospel of John, is about God's relationship with us through Jesus. As we marvel at the relationship of God and Jesus and humanity this morning, we reflect too about our relationship with God. This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. Folks, the waiting is almost over!

This Advent Sunday morning will soon become Christmas Eve night — the night on which we celebrate the incarnation: God with us, who brings God fully into the world. Are we ready to receive this awesome gift? Have our hearts been filled with hope, peace and joy so that we emanate them out into the world? Do we receive the love of God, that we can shine it into a dark world? For if we do, we are able to see the world as God does, not dark but waiting for light.

After seeing Bedford Falls without him, George cries to his angel: "Clarence! Clarence! Help me, Clarence! Get me back! Get me back, I don't care what happens to me! Get me back to my wife and kids! Help me, Clarence, please! Please! I wanna live again. I wanna live again. I want to live again. Please, God, let me live again." George no longer sees the darkness of life but yearns to be light for those he loves — his wife, his kids, his brother, his friends, his neighbors, his community. George becomes fully engaged in living, not overcome with the struggles but strengthened by love, love given and love received.

Fully engaged — God with us. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." As we move into this Christmas Eve, on this Sunday of Love, let us all allow our hearts to break again, to let love come in. Let's move beyond the fear of the struggles, the complacency of routine, the stress of deadlines, the paralysis of not knowing what to do. Instead, in the midst of the darkness, let's seek the light of love and receive the greatest gift ever given — God born to us in Jesus, Jesus who reveals for each of us and all of us the Word. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God — fully engaged with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.