



LESSONS IN LIVING

Introduction to Christian Mysticism

“Life Itself Is Our Teacher”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
November 30, 2025

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-5 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

In the beginning, there was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light - a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

Sermon

Well, get ready, this is going to be a weird one, probably. (laughter) We're coming to the conclusion of the series on mysticism, and the beginning of the Christmas season. The wonderful thing about the Christmas season is the stories and the songs, the hymns, are so mystical that people can feel the meaning, without getting weird about it.

Because the hard thing about mysticism is that when you turn it into a philosophy, it's already insane. What people were originally talking about was a sense of depth that we feel. Sometimes it ties us to the Earth, to whatever the source is that we come out of, a tie that binds us to others, and a sense that we can learn from life, that life itself is our teacher.

If I have any gift to give between now and my funeral, whenever that is, is to move from the paradigm of a preacher who you have to somehow believe that they know what they're talking about, which the odds are pretty low when you think about it, when you think about it. When you think of the preachers you've known.

But what I think Jesus was trying to do and Buddha as well, is to teach us to learn from life itself. I've never wanted in any way, shape, or form for you to take my word for anything. What I'm trying to do is reframe what a lot of us were taught so that we can be fed by life itself, which is a whole different religion.

In the early Church, it looks to me like there was a mystery religion in many of the early churches, and you had three years where you were called a believer. And that was sort of like the amateur hour. And then there'd be an initiation into life, into love and into a sense of a larger self.

People have asked me if there are any books they can read on mysticism. And the problem about even the best books is we start focusing on mysticism itself, and that's never the point. The point is to find the sacred in your life itself, in *your* life.

It seems to me the stories of scripture were all trying to lead us to our own hearts. Particularly the Christmas stories are really good at that. Because in the infancy narratives around the world where God becomes a baby, all of a sudden you realize, okay, this baby can't do much for me. I've got to take care of the baby. I've got to help the baby grow. That sense of yourself is that you're learning from life. So you may feel confused and lost, but that's the only place to start. If you can trust that there's something at work within you.

We're looking today at what's called the *Prologue of John*. It's one of my favorite places in scripture – not that it makes sense – because you can't really translate it. I mean, it's very torturous. It's only prepositions. A lot of prepositions. It *was* God, *was with* God. In a noun-based language like English, you lose the poetry.

But it seems to me that the only way it makes sense to start the Gospel of John with this poem, is if the stories that follow are illustrations of this truth. If the prologue is the philosophical truth, and the stories are mythic, they don't have to be true. They're illustrating truth about your life. You can't know what happened 2,000 years ago.

You could study the historical Jesus, but you're in for a real bad surprise because the archeological evidence is almost nonexistent. If we can't find the sacred in our own hearts, we're probably not going to find it anywhere else. I hear this passage calling us to a deeper understanding of who we are.

I'm not going to use the quotes that I have in my sheet. I feel like it was distracting in the first service. When this sermon gets typed up, who's ever got the unfortunate task of typing it, call me. That's you? (laughter) Call me, and I'll go through them. I'll tell you where everything comes from, and that way you can look it up and find it.

One of the most amazing people from the early Church was named Justin Martyr. That sounds like an early Church person, right? (laughter) He said all kinds of weird things, like the logos, in the beginning was the Word. The Word wasn't the Bible. The Word was the creative principle of reality. It was closer to the laws of physics than it is to scripture.

Now the point makes more sense. In the beginning was the Word. In the beginning, it wasn't the Bible, wasn't the physical Jesus. There's a principle by which reality comes into existence, and that's the core of your life.

A lot of the imagery is royal. *King* Jesus. It's not about another human being. It's about a human being who knows what a human being is in the Cosmos. In the mystical tradition, when you see Jesus with a crown on it. If it's a golden crown, it symbolizes the sun. If it's a silver crown, it symbolizes the moon, because it's talking about the Cosmos. You're not submitting to a human leader. You're submitting to the universe, which is a very different kind of thing. You're submitting to reality, and you're recalibrating your life around what's going to be most real for you.

But anyway, Justin Martyr was accused of heresy, obviously, as he starts spreading this new religion. And he actually says to a Roman inquisitor, he says, “When we talk about Jesus being born of a virgin, suffering, being raised again on the third day, resurrected in heaven, we're not saying anything different than what you say about the sons of Jupiter.”

Now, what I hear that saying is we're speaking mythologically to illustrate Cosmic truths. If we realized how valuable that is, we would prefer that over history, which you can't get back to prove in the first place. But if it's happening to you now, that's the most important information there is.

During this series, we're going to start listening to Christmas hymns. Well, not listening, we'll be singing them. Today, we're singing *What Child Is This*. The way I was taught that hymns is, what child is this? It's Jesus, the ultimate nepo baby. Son of God. Better be nice to him. It seems to me the song is about you and me, about what it means to be a human being born into the Cosmos. What child is this who lay to rest on Mary's lap, is sleeping.

In John's poem, it says, in the beginning was the Word, and everything was created through the Word. Now, to a Jewish mystic, that would be Sophia. We did a series on Sophia sometime back. It would be a female image, not a male image. But in Greek, *logos* is a male word. John was apparently familiar with Heraclitus, who used that word *logos* to mean the principle by which everything changes. To Heraclitus, everything is change. The world looks like chaos, But there's an order there, in the *logos*. In music, it's the beauty. In logic, it's the truth. In physics, it's the structure of things. .



In ancient cultures, very often they think of us being created in the image of God, it has to be something we look like. A lot of cultures in the desert think our fingerprints are remnants of the patterns of the sand.

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You may not have seen this too often in Presbyterian churches, but think for a moment how weird it is that the essence of chemistry and the elements is mathematical. That by rearranging the parts, you change the substance. That's really weird when you think about it. You have this sense of that is the creative principle that's bringing you into being.

You are the Word made flesh. You are the wisdom of the universe incarnated, not just Jesus, but all of us. That sounds a whole lot more important to me, and helpful, than for me to spend my life knowing Jesus but not knowing myself. A lot of the heartbreaking mischief that the Church is causing right now is based on people that know Jesus, but they don't know themselves, which means they don't really know Jesus. Because Jesus is always leading us to our own heart and enlarging it so that it includes everyone. The first point that I get from John's poem is, we are the Word made flesh. We are the embodiment of a Cosmic pattern.

The second thing, in our hymn, it says, Why was this God child, this child of the sun, child of the cosmos, born in such mean estate? Why in your poem, put him in a manger, a cattle trough. Again, the royal symbol is Cosmic. This is a Cosmic child, but on Earth, it's going to have to run their whole lives, get pushed around. What it's saying is the essence of a human being is more than anything that happens to them. So when we look at the world and we see despair – look at the Christmas story. Herod's got more lines than Jesus does. It's darkness, it's cold, and yet it's the most radiant night of the year. So it's saying there's a light that's shining in the darkness.



This is also very weird. The ancients realized that there are certain growth patterns in nature that have a mathematical equation to them. So like the spirals and the horns and this thing. In John's poem, he starts with the darkness. That means, as I understand it from the mystery religions, that means matter, space, energy. That grows into life, as you can see there.

In human beings, that grows to sentience. It grows into consciousness, in awareness that John describes as light. You are the light of the world, not because of anything you've done, but your consciousness is the universe becoming aware of itself.

The ancients were not dumb people. They were incredibly intelligent. They just didn't have science yet. So they had to try to figure things out. And a lot of their guesses were insane. But a lot of them are really helpful for us to remember who we are and to remember our roots. Not only into life, but into the elements themselves. So that we're not afraid of the knowledge that we return to the common, the being, the elemental, that there's a sense in which that's always our home.

When the question is raised, why can't we see the Word? And of course, the Church will show you images of it. When I went to Israel, they showed us the hotel of the Good Samaritan, even though it was a parable. (laughter) I think what John is implying is you can't see the Word because it has to come through you.

In Hinduism, there's a saying, "*The truth you cannot know, the truth you can only be.*" One of the reasons the Church moved away from the Gnostic is it becomes crazy when you turn it into a philosophy. Because now you're standing outside your life, looking at it, describing it instead of living it. There are some truths you can only live, you can only sing, you can only dance.

So it becomes very hard to talk about that. But I think that's the second insight, that we can't see the light because that's what we are. That's what we bring to the world. And it's a mistake to think you're going to find it externally. It comes through us.

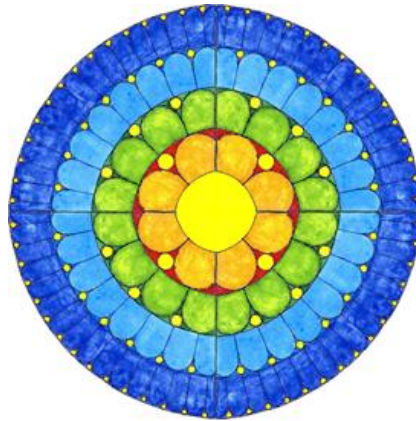
Then the last thing that I get from this poem, and from the hymn that we're looking at, is where the song says, why is this baby born in such a mean estate? Then it says, "*Good Christians, fear for sinners here, the silent Word is pleading.*" Have you ever noticed how many contradictions there are in the Christmas story? Silent Word, light shining out of the darkness, very Zen.

If you are the embodiment of Cosmic wisdom, that means that even when you're lost and confused or you've ruined everything, it seems like there's still a Word inside you that's pleading on your behalf, silently. Theologically, we say that's Jesus. But the problem is you externalize this, and it's not happening through you.

Then you got the problem that God's a mean person, and Jesus is taking your punishment from this mean God. And as much as you could say, well, God is all loving, but also all righteous, it's like you can't really get around that, because God makes the rules. To kill Jesus because God's mad at you, that's not going to lead you to love in your source.

But if there's a love that is so strong that you can't lose it, and if that's what the symbol means, that this Word is working within you, that you don't have to find it, you don't have to prove yourself good, you don't have to be saved in the traditional sense. It's who you are, most essentially.

The philosopher Epictetus, a Stoic, said how arrogant we would be if we were the children of Caesar, but how much greater it is to be the children of God. In Stoic poetry, to be the son or daughter of God means to have your mind and heart aligned to the creative principle. That's something you can carry with you always.



I've tried to leave some things to work with. When we were building this church, this is the stained glass that you see up there. What I wanted was a cross in the middle, and the stained glass has the cross, it doesn't have the cross in this particular picture. But I used to – when I was in high school– read Carl Jung, the psychologist, and he believed the mandala was like this universal symbol he had seen in all religions all around the world.

I wanted to use that idea of universality and say, we are Presbyterian. We're not just making it up as we go. There's a book that we have allegiance to, the Bible. We're not going to let it make us insane, but we're going to learn from it. It's going to be our footprint. We're going to use the rituals and this kind of thing. But everything we do has to grow into this universal love. And that's the mandala background.

I really think in the mystery religions, that's what it meant to be in Christ, where your ego dies and you're born into your larger self. That lasts for about four minutes, and then you come back. (laughter) But if you can begin that dance of sometimes remembering the greatness within you, remembering those times when love is just there and you love the world or you love animals, you feel your depth into the cosmos.

That's what a mystical religion is, and that's what a mystical experience is. And I think that's what John is trying to share with us. And he's going to tell stories, a lot of the stories he borrows from other religions. Not to mislead people, but to lead them to their own hearts, even if they're from a different religion than what he's used to.

So in a moment, we're going to sing the song, *What Child is This?* And if you could approach the Christmas hymns a little different this year and think about, how does this sacred get born in my life, in your life? Yes, Jesus was the child of the stars, but so are you. What does it mean to be a human being in the Cosmos? What is the gift that you bring? What is the larger self of which you are a part? Whatever the laws of physics are, that Word, whatever that Word is, You are the Word made flesh.

That's who you most essentially are. You're not defined by what happens to you. The MAGA movement cannot touch this part of you. So you can let that go. And you can stop looking for God because this is the light that you don't see. It's the light by which you see. It comes through you. You don't find it externally.

Then finally, there's a trust that's there that you cannot make a mistake that's going to disqualify you. That even at your worst, the silent Word is pleading within you, with every cell in your body.

So this Christmas, in addition to celebrating the birth of Jesus, I'm hoping that we'll celebrate the miraculous nature of every one of us, and realize that every one of us has had a birth that is sacred.

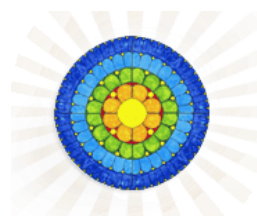
Let us take a moment first to think about how we would understand these words ourselves.

Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

May the light of Advent lead you into the mystery of your heart. May it illumine the pattern of being that weaves all of us together. Now go out with compassion into that bright and beautiful world that we call home, and plant seeds of kindness and justice and mercy and joy. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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