

This morning we continue in our series that is matching up a Christmas hymn with a Christmas Scripture passage, and today we’re looking at *O Holy Night* and the first fourteen verses of the gospel of John. I’d like to start this morning by giving you some of the history of *O Holy Night*, because it’s fascinating. Like many hymns, it was originally written as a poem. In this case, it came from the southern French town of Roquemaure (roh-kuh-MORE). In 1847, the poet **Placide Cappeau** was asked by the local parish priest to write a poem for Christmas Eve Mass to commemorate the renovation of the church organ. Interestingly, Cappeau wasn’t particularly religious—some say he was an atheist, even—yet the poem he wrote is deeply theological.



The music was composed a bit later by Cappeau’s friend **Adolphe Adam**, a well-known French composer of ballets and operas—and he was Jewish. Cappeau felt that a poem alone wasn’t enough to commemorate the organ; it needed to be sung. So, Adam wrote the melody, and *O Holy Night* debuted at Christmas Eve Mass in 1847.



By the early 1850s church leaders began expressing concern about the hymn—not because of its theology, which was considered sound—but because of the backgrounds of its creators. Cappeau’s unorthodox religious views—again, maybe atheist, even—and Adam’s Jewish faith made the song controversial. While the hymn was never formally banned from Catholic services, its use was discouraged. By the early 1900s, however, it was once again widely used.

But there’s more!

In North America, the English translation—which was done in 1855 by **John Sullivan Dwight**—became immediately and massively popular. And he was a *transcendentalist Unitarian pastor*! Unitarians deny the Trinity—one of the core doctrines of the Christian faith. And while transcendentalism is loosely rooted in Christian ideas—it is a significant distortion of, and deviation from, Biblical Christianity.



**So, it's fascinating that this beloved Christmas hymn had a lyricist, a composer, and a translator (for us who sing it in English) who were all theologically questionable, at best.** Also, other than briefly mentioning the wise men who visited Jesus, none of the people of Matthew's and Luke's narratives make it into this song. No Mary, Joseph, Angels, Shepherds, no animals, no manger, none of it.

All of this makes *O Holy Night* a fitting hymn to pair with John 1:1–14, because John's Gospel is the odd duck when it comes to the biographies of Jesus. The big picture is the same: Jesus is born, ministers/teaches, is crucified, and raised back to live on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. But he gives many different events...and writes from a different perspective, especially in regards to the birth of Jesus. Matthew and Luke give us the narrative of the events and people—genealogies, shepherds, angels, a manger, Mary and Joseph, and so forth. **John, however, tells the Christmas story without any of the familiar characters.** No Mary, no Joseph, no shepherds, or angels. No wise guys from the East, no gifts. No manger. No animals. The list of omissions goes on and on.

And yet—like *O Holy Night*—the theology John gives us is incredibly deep. John tells the story of the Son of God coming to us as one of us, but from a completely different angle. So, let's turn to **John 1:1–14**, reading all fourteen verses at once this morning. This is God's Word to you and to me today.

**John begins his biography of Jesus by connecting it to the very beginning of Scripture with the words, "In the beginning..."** As you may know, Genesis (whole OT) was originally written in Hebrew. But about 300 years before Jesus' birth, Genesis was translated into Greek. By the time the

New Testament was written (beginning in early 50's A.D.), the entire Greek translation of Old Testament had been around for 150 years or so. John intentionally uses the same first two Greek words found in Genesis 1:1, "En arche." "In the beginning." **John is showing us that the God of Genesis is the same God revealed in Jesus.** This word made flesh, who was God, and was with God *in the beginning*, and through whom all things were made, has now come to us as one of us.

John is clearly painting a picture of the divine come in flesh. As the hymn says, "O night divine! O night, when Christ was born!" **The fancy theological term for "The divine come to us in the flesh" is the *incarnation of Jesus.*** The word became flesh. It's God come to us as one of us. This is the Christmas event told in a completely different way.

**John also introduces us to one of his central themes in his biography of Jesus: Jesus is the light of all humankind, contrasted with darkness.** This theme is particularly strong in John's writing (heard it in our Advent candle litany earlier), though it's there in Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well. We highlight this every Christmas Eve when we each hold candles that are lit from the Christ candle. The electric lights are turned off and the darkness recedes as the candles, representing the light of Christ, light up the room.

After briefly mentioning John the Baptist in verses 6-8: **Verses 9-13 tell us that the true light that gives light to everyone came into the world, and particularly came to "his own"—to Israel.** Yet, many did not receive him. This doesn't mean no Jewish people received him. Many Jews in Jesus' day did believe in him and follow him. The 12 disciples, for instance, were all Jewish. At one point Jesus sends out 70 disciples who were certainly all, or nearly all, Jewish. Nearly everyone Jesus ministered to was Jewish. But many, particularly those in religious leadership, did not embrace Jesus.

And then John writes something fairly astonishing: **"To all who did receive him...he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).** Through trusting and following Jesus, we come to know God as our heavenly Father. When we do this, we receive our most foundational identity as a child of the God and Creator of the Universe.

And then verse 14 brings it all together: **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).** That verse alone is the Christmas story. In fact, it’s more than that: It’s Jesus’ life and mission, wrapped up in one sentence.

So, Jesus is the Son—capital S—of the Father. He’s part of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a mystery, and every analogy falls short, but **maybe this one** helps:



The Trinity is one essence, fully God, expressed in three persons or three beings. This tin of popcorn is somewhat the same: It’s all popcorn, but it is expressed in three flavors.

As all analogies of the Trinity do, this one breaks down, because God is not made of parts. Each being of the Trinity is fully God—they’re not separate Gods. But maybe the popcorn helps a little. Anyway, if you get one of these for Christmas, consider it a very spiritual and theologically appropriate gift. In fact, and maybe I shouldn’t say this, but maybe it’s almost on par with Communion. 🤪 (Kidding!)

So, here’s the connection I want to make. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. But in verse 12, John says that those who receive Jesus also become children of God—sons or daughters. But there’s an important distinction we must remember: that does not make us part of the Trinity.

**What verse 12 does do is this: It gives us our deepest and most foundational identity.** When a child is born into a family, the very first sense of identity comes from the mom and dad. Even before birth, this identity is forming in the womb. Once born, the child starts to learn what he or she looks like, how to relate to others, what it means to be cared for, how to behave, what it means to be connected to other human beings and what it means to be human.

The same is true spiritually as a child of God. It's not just a metaphor or a label. This is a real relationship with God our Creator, formed through receiving Jesus.

**And this relationship defines who we are.** You know, we struggle with identity in our culture. We define ourselves by what we do or who we associate with. "I'm a teacher. I'm a doctor. I'm retired. I'm Republican. I'm Democrat. I'm rich. I'm poor. I'm a skier. I'm a singer. I'm single. I'm married. I'm young. I'm old. I'm 'fill in the blank.'" None of these are ultimate identities. They're partial, they're imperfect, and they're temporary. They can be changed or taken away at a moment's notice.

**But when you become a child of God through receiving Jesus: that identity never changes.** That is who you are. That's your ultimate identity. Our other identities might change some. But our identity as a child of God because of the Son of God, Jesus, never changes. And from that relationship, we learn what it means to be human. Just as a baby grows up in a family and is shaped by it, so it is as a child of God. Our values are impacted by this identity, as is our attitude, and finally, so is our behavior. A lot of people – including a lot of Christians – think Christianity is about behavior modification first and foremost. It's not. That's the last part. Our behavior is impacted by our attitudes, which is impacted by our values, and those are impacted by our identity. It all starts with receiving Jesus and the identity of "child of God" that comes with that.

And John's majestic and otherworldly telling of Christmas really highlights this truth. You belong to God! You are loved! You are a child of the God of the Universe—The God who put the cosmos into place! You belong to him! It's a stunning truth, and it is ours when we receive Jesus.

**So, this Christmas, if you've never received this gift, then there is no time like the present to open that present and receive Jesus.** The Bible frequently uses "adoption" as a metaphor to speak of what it means to be part of God's family. The adoption process in real life is costly, slow, and agonizing. Gwen and I have done it twice, so I speak from experience. God's adoption of you was also costly—but Jesus has done all the work. And it's

love—what we celebrate on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent—that led him to do it. He left the heavenly throne room over all creation—Paul writes in Philippians 2 that Jesus “emptied himself and became nothing”—so that you could be adopted as a child of God, because he loves you. Now’s the time to receive that gift of Jesus and begin life as a child of God.

And if you have already received Jesus...**If you’ve been adopted into his family and you trust him, then keep standing firm in that identity: you are a child of God.** Don’t let the other identities that are built around what you do become your foundational identity and supersede the identity God gives you in Jesus. Don’t let the gifts under the tree surpass the gift that God gives in Jesus: that you are a child of God.

And this leads us to giving God all the praise and all the glory. The three people who gave us this gift of *O Holy Night* are a testament that you don’t have to have perfect faith or theology to bring God praise and glory. No child is perfect, but they are still loved. It’s the same in God’s family: we may be imperfect but God still loves us, and he can work through us.

And as *O Holy Night* says, we are invited to “fall on our knees” and “hear the angel voices;” to “behold our king” and “before him lowly bend;” and as the hymn closes: “Christ is the Lord! O Praise his name forever! His power and glory ever more proclaim! His power and glory evermore proclaim!” **This is the response of those who believe and know that they are children of God because of what God has done in Jesus Christ.** It’s the response of those who can echo verse 14, “we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (verse 14). He alone is worthy of our devotion and our praise and worship because he has all the power and all the glory.

So, church: let’s do that. Not just in singing *O Holy Night*; Not just in worship on Sundays or on Christmas Eve, not just when it’s convenient...but with our whole lives. **Discipleship to Jesus encompasses all of who we are, because we are adopted into the family of God as his children.** And you can live for him each and every day, bringing him all the praise and all the

glory, because you are a child of God through receiving Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.