

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

December 21, 2025

Cusa's Lab

Dr. Jo Forrest

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The late Michael Gerson, who wrote for the *Washington Post* describes the choice before us during this holy season of Advent: "On the evidence of our senses, despair is perfectly rational. By all appearances, the universe is cold, empty and indifferent...This leaves every human being with a choice between despair and longing. Both are reasonable responses to a great mystery."

Do we side with tangible evidence?

Today marks the Winter Solstice. In the northern hemisphere, long hours of darkness dominate the few hours of light.

The literal darkness in the sky compounds the weariness from the anger boiling up. A logical choice would be to retreat and protect our souls.

As Christians, we are not asked to pretend the darkness is not real, we look for God to light the way...and to believe.

This is the final Advent sermon exploring the widely differing ways our gospels tell of Jesus' arrival in human form. Mark tells us we will find Jesus whenever we find ourselves in the wilderness of our lives. Luke describes those who seek justice and mercy will encounter Jesus. Matthew imagines an ever-widening home.

All those gospels point to Jesus' entrance into human life with the messiness of human birth, political upheaval, scandal.

Today, we turn to the Gospel of John. This writer frames God's orderly plan of incarnation beginning with the birth of the cosmic realm. Its poetic, orderly, and all for you and me, today.

The Gospel of John persuades us to believe the darkness does not win.

Dear God,

*We often fear the darkness, darkness of the night,
despair from conflicts we endure, insecurity of not knowing.*

We seek certainty and wonder if faith is enough.

Quiet the noise around. Turn off the tinsel lights.

*Send your spirit among us so that as we hear your words,
we see your light and believe in your son. Amen.*

John 1:1-5, 10-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Whenever I think of the *incarnation*, the theological word to describe God coming to us in the person of Jesus, I recall one of my professors at University of Chicago and her two dogs. God and dogs. Dogs and God. For me they go together... please bear with me.

Susan Schreiner was a tough, cranky, intellectual historian of the medieval period.

An intellectual historian studies the evolution of human thought, ideas, and the people who shape them. They examine ancient texts to discover how concepts that develop within cultural, social, and political contexts become intellectual movements. And, they trace the influence these lofty ideas have on the beliefs of ordinary people.

This time my age at school benefited me. Schreiner was curious about my past and my plans for ministry. I could snag an appointment when other students struggled to find an opening in her scant office hours.

Susan had fought for her position in the academy when women were considered too fragile or intellectually inferior.

We found a common interest in our love for our dogs. Her face would light up as she recalled some embarrassing antic from her two golden retrievers. She softened, acknowledging the relief they offered.

After laboring over an obscure text or grinding away on a computer, she escaped the *work-of-the-mind* with her dogs. Dogs just being dogs, playing and discovering, reminded her to be fully human herself.

She named her dogs for the theologians who mattered most in her thinking...*and in her faith*. This intellectual historian, who devoted her life to mapping coherent arguments from one era to another, conceded the precious gift of pure belief, which cannot be explained rationally.

One dog she called “Luther” for Martin Luther. This 16th century theologian is widely known for sparking the great reform, paving the way for the protestant churches. She named the other dog for a theologian who is as obscure as Luther is notorious. He was “Cusa,” for Nicholas of Cusa.

I was never as bright as my fellow students, but I was savvy enough to pay attention to the work of this theologian for whom our professor named her beloved dog.

Nicholas of Cusa became a priest and academic during the early 1400s. He studied theories that attempted to prove God’s existence by positive or negative arguments.

At that time, logic won respect in the church and academia while human curiosity and transcendent encounters were dismissed as inferior guides to knowledge.¹

Cusa understood that to explore the uncertain – God – you can only go through that which is certain. And since material things are always unstable, he pursued the only discipline relatively free of subjectivity: mathematics.

He wrote...throughout the ages, “the wise, wisely sought illustrations of things that the intellect could search...” and mathematical signs have an inherent incorruptible certainty.” These were the paths to divine knowledge.²

Cusa's ability to create coherent and persuasive arguments led him to become a mediator. After successfully reconciling warring factions within the Catholic Church, in an attempt to reunite with the eastern church, the Pope sent him to Constantinople.

In 1437 the negotiations failed.

On his return voyage home, an unrelenting storm tossed their vessel throughout the night. Amid blinding darkness, Cusa claims he received a “celestial gift”. That encounter defied language and precious math to describe how it changed his belief in God.

¹ Susan Schreiner, “Nicholas of Cusa,” Lecture, Early Modern Catholicism, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, October 12, 2009.

² Nicolas of Cusa, “On Learned Ignorance,” Trans. Jasper Hopkins, <http://jasper-hopkins.info/DI-I-12-2000.pdf>.

The treatise he wrote later resumed the discipline of math, specifically geometry. He explored the relationship of a point to a line and the center of a circle lying within its circumference. He argued the paradox and the possibility of the infinite being including in the finite. Scholars describe his insight as “elliptical and sometimes obscure to the point of intractability.”³

He grinds his reader to complete frustration. At that moment, he reveals what experience taught him:

we are to seek and seek until we finally
let go of our understanding –
comparative, quantified or logical –
and when we empty ourselves of such lofty ideals
of knowing, and finally admit ignorance, then we find
God.

His famous treatise *On Learned Ignorance* remains, for me, the most difficult and lucid explanations of the incarnation. When we arrive at the end of our ability to know God, God teaches us to believe. When we let go of any quest for certainty and become vulnerable, we experience an intimate relationship with God.

This esteemed mathematician set aside all the proofs and theorems – at least for a bit – to revel in the divine insight given to him one stormy night.

³ “A concise introduction to the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa,” *Cross Currents* 32, no. 3 (September 1982): 366-369. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 10, 2017).

The church paid attention to this man of reason and intellect. His work allowed later theologians, such as Luther, to move beyond logical proofs. Cusa taught us that to find God we are to go experience life as a follower of Jesus. Give into the vulnerability of just how human and finite you are...and be captured by the infinite source of all life.

You'll never know, but through Jesus, you will come to believe.

The Gospel of John appeals to our heady desires to comprehend the origin of the cosmos and God's grand plans for our life today. John appeals to this curiosity by how he conceives of Jesus' origin, ministry, resurrection, and our skeptical response. John never mentions a birth story, parents, Magi, or dreams. Jesus just is.

The first verse "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" echoes the Book of Genesis. Our Bible's opening proclaims God speaks...and the universe comes into being. God speaks light into being as a big-bang an utterance, a speech, a word.

God sets the sun, moon, and stars into orbit, speaking order from nothingness. The poetry grows with measured syllables to reflect the rationality inherent in God's creation. God creates through God's word.

This gospel calls Jesus the *Word* with a capital W from the Greek word *logos*. John borrows that idea from Greek philosophers to persuade us Jesus is more than human. The

Greeks word *logos* translates to “word”, but more than that, *logos* is the very wisdom and heart of God – the Word.

John writes that *Word* becomes flesh. The eternal becomes bound by time. The creator becomes creature. The immortal humbles its own self to walk in the shadow of death. The Word became flesh and lives with us. Jesus is and was part of God’s grand plan from the very beginning.

According to John,

 Jesus walks our common life to teach us by example
 to celebrate at weddings, to share our bread with the
hungry,
 to grieve with tears at the death of friends,
 to welcome the stranger.

All of these thoroughly human encounters inspire us to be thoroughly human with physical urges, emotions, and the need for community.

Jesus pushes the limits of our thinking to show us that we think too small.

When we are at our most vulnerable, Jesus showers us with God’s love. Jesus proclaims his mission is to bring us life and life abundant. Be alive.

And there is more. Jesus defies the reality by walking on water, calming storms with only a word, and raising the dead to life. These signs (not miracles) Jesus performs offer more than mercy; they deliberately argue Jesus’ identity as God’s beloved son.

Never afraid of his purpose, he goes to the cross and through the grave to reveal the power of God's love to pierce the darkest, darkness known to humankind.

John's gospel story tells us that we find Jesus any and every time we press against the limits of our human reason – what is knowable – and let go, then we encounter God.

So, if Cusa worked today, I think we'd still find him in the laboratories of a university.

He'd want to keep challenging what is *known*. He'd fiddle around in astrophysics to find the origin of the big bang – and expect to find God. Or he'd study quantum physics to look for what scientists call the "God" particle.

He'd wade into human biology and learn. Then he'd question those false binaries that the church accepted. And as a man of the church, he'd admit how wrong they were about denying fellowship to all of God's children. He'd let experiences of love teach him. He'd advocate for change.

He'd celebrate all the times the old thinking – the known-knowns – were blown apart by innovative ideas because of new experiences.

Who Jesus is is far more elusive, mysterious, and impossible-to-pin-down than we have yet imagined.

This man of the church would continue to do the work of the church. The reality of who Jesus is emerges in the lives of the plain, poor, ordinary people all around us.

Certainty is never the goal; truth is found in believing that Jesus Christ is one with God.

We're usually blocked against being awestruck, it doesn't feel safe to become unstable. We block ourselves from being awestruck just as we block against great love and great suffering.

It takes courage to be vulnerable. To say, "I don't know" or "I've changed my mind" or "I was wrong." Empty yourself of the desire for certainty. Instead, marvel at the mystery, really imagine God in our flesh, and rejoice. Accept that we have limits in symbols and language, but we will never have limits in the ways God can startle, comfort, and inspire us.

At the moment we admit our fallibility, through Christ, God grants us grace and mercy to begin again.

Advent is a time to ponder these paradoxes, so we appreciate what a gift God's presence in human flesh was and is. Let his light guide you. Let him love you.



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