

Midnight Communion Service - Christmas 2016 – John 1:1-14

An artist paints on into the night.

His paint pallet is filled with endless shades, merging into one another. His work is fevered. It's a very important night and the painting must be ready. And so faster and faster he paints; dabbing here, spotting there, swirling quickly one moment, and then sketching a line precise line the next.

There is paint on his fingertips where the artist has used his fingers to alter bit of the picture; to smooth rough edges, to lighten darker areas, to alter the mood of some of the lighting.

The huge canvas has been full of paint for what feels like millennia, but the artist, sweating now with the frenzied exertion, hasn't been able to put his brushes down on his creation. It's never been quite finished. And so, the painting has grown and developed as the character have taken on a life of their own; sometimes to the satisfaction of the artist and he has briefly allowed himself a break from painting, taken a step back, and smiled his appreciation for the artwork; but sometimes the characters have turned out darker than he had intended causing the artist to frown, reworking the canvas again and again.

He keeps on painting, sometimes intensely, with his nose right up to the canvas, and sometimes further back with big broad strokes of his brush.

But tonight he is sweating as he works. He anticipates, perhaps even worries. There is a flaw in the painting. It's always been there, but now, tonight is the night to deal with it. The flaw is so deeply engrained in the painting that every single character seems polluted by it, every brush-stroke tinged with the sadness of it.

And so tonight is a really important night. The artist steps back, flexes his hand, stiff from the painting. He sighs with the knowing of what it would take to repair this masterpiece. He hesitates. Prepares himself. And suddenly, decisively gets back to work.

He begins again in the very centre of the canvas. He paints a woman. A pregnant woman in labour; her husband beside her in a cattle house, holding her hand. Pain shows in the mother's face and concern in the father's. He grips her hand as another contraction rolls on and her groans of exertion are muffled by the lambs amongst the straw calling for their mothers. It won't be long now.

But even as the paint tries to dry, the artist works feverishly. It must be right, the conditions must be perfect. Every stick of straw must be right. Only one thing can fix this flawed painting and that is for the artist to enter it himself. Shaking slightly, the artist takes a breath, glances at his studio with all his royal privilege and riches. He looks around at his servants, shining in their robes. He takes a deep breath...

And the baby is born. A perfect, flawless little form enters the centre of the canvass, speckled with drying blotches of birthing fluids. The baby appears to radiate out of the painting even as it is swaddled in rough blankets. The cattle house seems transformed as strange guests arrive, drawn by the light of the baby's arrival. This small flawless centre of the canvas immediately begins to produce ripple effects across the painting. Something has changed. A new light has come in the shape of a small, perfect, helpless child.

Immediately also, the family must flee. Not all the characters are pleased with this flawless baby. Next to it, their flawed nature appears dirty; next to it they appear unimportant. Herod is the first to

try to erase this baby from the painting, and so suddenly the family must leave and flee as refugees; the blur of this flight clearly visible as a light streak across the painting. Other characters fail to see the light in the baby, his perfection, his power. And other characters, like Herod, tried to rub him out or paint over him, leaving dark smeared patches around them.

There were few who recognised the artist himself, come to work within his own painting. But his paint-stained fingertips were there to see as he healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised the dead - smoothing the rough edges and bringing light to dark areas of the picture – repairing the flaws in the fabric of the canvas, the sad darkness within each character.

Eventually though, the artist was ejected from his own painting. Characters gathered around him and poured dark colours upon him until he was gone from view. Sadness gathered and the ripples of light flooded backwards onto the centre of the canvas as a gathering storm of darkened colour. The light seemed gone, the painting ruined. When suddenly with a flash of impossibly brilliant colour, a spectrum of rainbows upon rainbows, the artist swallowed the darkest colours which covered him. His blinding light cascaded from the centre of the painting, remaking it from the inside, removing the flaws in the painting. Suddenly the characters that recognised him were no longer simply blobs of paint on a canvas but the artist very own family. A family, a community, that he could leave in the picture to continue the rippling.

Returning to the divine art studio, hands still stained red from the effort, the artist stared at his painting. The rippling would continue, until one day it would be a perfect masterpiece. The artist picked up his brush and began dabbing, brushing and creating again.

As he paints, small images begin popping up over the canvas. These images show a young mother with a newborn in a cattle house; her husband and a strange band of visitors gathered around. Each image is slightly different as each member of the artist's canvas family imagine and remember the day when this perfect baby entered their world and brought healing to the intrinsic flaws within it. Each small picture, each Christmas celebration, a sign of thankful remembrance for the artist's work, and each one a statement of hope that, because of the artist, one day the ripples he started will produce a flawless world forever.

Re-read John 1:1-12 slowly (possibly missing v6-8)