



December 24, 2017 | 8:30am

GOD COMES TO MAKE A HOME WITH US

Pastor Lisa Kipp

JOHN 1:1-18 NRSV

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.


⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who 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. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Some of you may remember the Schowalter family. Dave, Karen, and their four daughters were beloved members of this congregation. Tragedy struck their family ten years ago. On their way home from a week up north at Camp Olson, they were involved in a horrible car accident. The four girls and Karen survived. Dave died on impact.

Recently, oldest daughter Kirsten wrote a book about her experience of living with grief. The book is called, *In My Own Skin*. It's beautiful and raw and poetic. I sat down to read it a couple of weeks ago, and hardly moved from my couch until I



finished reading the entire book. Kirsten's words captured me from the very beginning. Listen to her words from page one:

“Walking through a forest of redwoods, I noticed the trees grew in clumps. One stump or dead tree was surrounded by a growth of new trees in a circle around it. Family circles is what they are called. It's like a show of solidarity, support, and community around both the end of life and potential new growth. Together, as one, in honest existence around the family circle.

My family has a pretty tight circle; my mom describes my three sisters and I as her four pillars. She says there's an energy about us that's greater than each of our parts. People can feel the sparks when we're together.

Our family circle is just like the redwood trees. We don't have lightness in us because that's all we are. We have lightness in us because we know the darkness, the end of life, intimately, and we choose to let new growth exist as we are.”¹

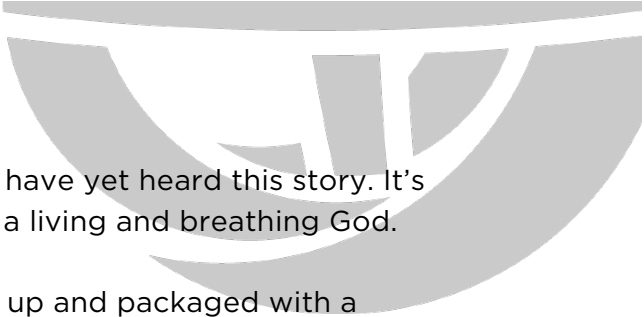
Kirsten's poetic first words are an introduction for the reader to enter into her story – to experience the darkness, the lightness, and witness the strength of the family circle. She does in her first pages exactly what a good prologue sets out to do – set the tone for the story, create the context for all the chapters that follow, and hook the reader in a way that keeps her planted on her couch until she reads each and every word.

Today we read the prologue to the gospel of John. This gospel starts unlike any of the other three gospels. There isn't a detailed account of Jesus' genealogy like we find in Matthew. It doesn't begin with John the Baptist's proclamation like we find in Mark. And we don't get the story of Mary, Joseph, and a baby born in a stable like we find in Luke. Instead, we hear poetic words that declare that the God who created the heavens and earth, the God who first breathed life into this world, is now coming to make his home with us as the Word made flesh. This God is light, and he is a light that even the darkness of this world can't extinguish.

These beginning words of John don't set up the story to give us information about Jesus, rather these words invite us into a story where something is supposed to happen to us when we read it. This is a gospel that was most likely written for a Jewish community that had chosen to identify themselves as believing in Jesus

¹ Schowalter, Kirsten. *In My Own Skin*. Berkley, CA, 2017. Available at www.amazon.com.





already, but it's also a gospel for those who may not have yet heard this story. It's an invitation to all people to have an encounter with a living and breathing God.

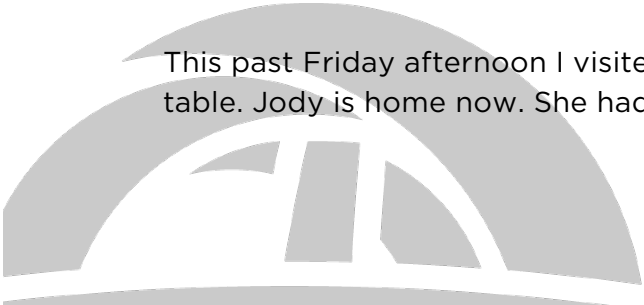
We quickly discover that God's story can't be boxed up and packaged with a pretty bow. Like the words of the prologue, Jesus' identity remains something of a mystery. It will take us, the readers, deep into the story to discover what all the signs we'll be given along the way will mean. Little by little, we will be given glimpses of how Jesus' light will shine bright, and we'll be invited to be witness to this light that shines still today amongst our world's places of deep darkness.

Zumbro member Jody Gladson has known a lot of darkness in her life. Twenty-three years ago this January, when Jody was just twenty-three-years-old, she was in a car accident. Jody has been unable to walk since that fateful day. She's had to rely on family members and nursing staff to care for her almost every need. A couple years after the accident, while she was enduring another long hospital stay, she met and fell in love with a man named David. Jody and David were married shortly thereafter, and were happily building their life together until heartbreak entered Jody's life again. In 2003, after just six years of marriage, David died of complications of multiple sclerosis.

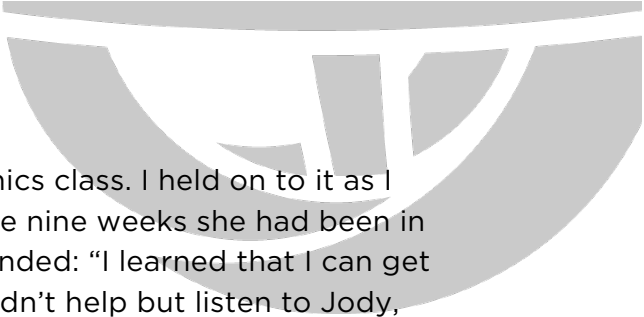
I've visited Jody off and on for probably the past five or so years. Whether at home in her bedroom, or quite often in a hospital room, until recently I'd never seen Jody out of bed. The visits were often hard. Jody was living in a deep darkness. I remember asking Jody about her purpose in life one afternoon, and her only response was, "to watch Netflix."

About a month ago, we learned that Jody was back in the hospital. This time she had a room in the Generose building, the mental health wing at St. Mary's Hospital. She'd been receiving ECT treatments, a type of therapy in which small electric currents are passed through the brain, with hopes of reversing certain mental illnesses; in Jody's case, depression.

A few weeks ago I visited Jody. I was shocked to find her sitting at a table watching the Vikings game and playing a game of cards with a group of people. We went down to her room to visit. For the first time ever, I saw hope in Jody's eyes. A week later, I visited her again. Life wasn't perfect. She desperately wanted to be home with her furried friends, but she told me she now had a goal to get out of her house once a day upon her return. For years, she'd hardly even gotten out of bed.



This past Friday afternoon I visited Jody again. This time we sat around her kitchen table. Jody is home now. She had some things she wanted to show me. One of



them was this Christmas tree. She made it in a ceramics class. I held on to it as I asked Jody what she learned about herself during the nine weeks she had been in the hospital. She thought for a while, and then responded: “I learned that I can get through anything, and God is always with me.” I couldn’t help but listen to Jody, look at the Christmas tree she had made, and think about the words from John 1. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* Jody continued, “I feel like I have this light inside of me, and it needs to come out.”

Jody’s life is still difficult. She has plenty of things to work through. But she has hope. And when you’ve been living in darkness for years, the presence of hope breathes in new life.

As we get further into the gospel of John we’re going to encounter Jesus. He’s going to welcome in outsiders, he’s going to heal those with incurable sickness, he’s going to feed bread to all who are hungry. Jesus is going to face darkness head on, and not be overcome. But perhaps the biggest miracle of all is that God comes to us in Jesus and makes a home with us. It’s a story of long ago that goes way back to the beginning of time, but it continues to breathe hope into our lives still today.

We’re all facing some sort of darkness in our lives. Whether it is grief, or depression, or a broken relationship, or enduring the constant news cycle, darkness is real. It’s invasive. It can be overwhelming. But this is the world that God breathed life into. This is the world that God was born into. This is the world that God will save.

Remember Kirsten Schowalter’s beginning words: “We have lightness in us because we have known the darkness ... and we choose to let new growth exist as we are.” Recall Jody Gladson’s declaration: “I learned that I can get through anything, and God is always with me.” The birth of Jesus is a sign for all the world that God can and does overcome any darkness. Amen.

