

This transcript was exported on Dec 02, 2023.

Rebecca: Now I'm thinking of the National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation scene where they do the drum roll before they try to plug in the lights!

Music: <introductory music>

Rebecca: Hello and welcome to Mind the Gap, a commentary podcast about all those verses that get left out of the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. I am one of your hosts, Becca. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a Lutheran pastor in Michigan, and I've been serving in parish ministry for five years.

Annemarie: And I'm your other host, Annemarie. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a Lutheran pastor in New Jersey, and I've been serving in parish ministry in the ELCA for 15 years.

Rebecca: You know how the lectionary pericopes occasionally skip over a handful of verses in the middle of a passage? We are putting those pieces back into the readings so that we can hear them in their entirety and give ourselves a chance to explore what they mean altogether...

Annemarie: ...how the exclusion of those verses does or doesn't change things, and what (if any) wisdom we can gain for our preaching by minding that gap.

Music: <introductory music>

Rebecca: As always, we so appreciate everyone who has supported us on our Ko-Fi and Patreon accounts. That's Lee and Kim, Weta, David, Jennifer, Jerry Melissa, and Liz. Thank you so much for what you make possible through your support. Annemarie, as we come together this week, what's on your mind?

Annemarie: Today I am thinking about this particular—the holiday season and the ways in which the church can provide spaces for all of the feelings that go with it. I was at bible study today and in two weeks I will be offering to my congregation a chance to gather for a Blue Christmas service, but I realized today at Bible study how powerful just offering that kind of thing is for people. And as a pastor who has experienced loss, and for whom this season of expected joy and I think really good reasons for happiness and family and together, often it comes as a mixed bag that we have to navigate, holding both joy and grief at the same time. And we're good humans who can do complex things, and that sometimes Blue Christmas is just one of those ways we hold space for the harder feelings and just being able to express them, to pray, to remember that God is with us in all of it. It's one of the things I love about being a pastor, is to let people have space for their feelings and to validate them with them and the life and the relief it brings them when we can do that. So that's what's on my mind today. It was a pretty powerful day. Rebecca, what is on your mind?

Rebecca: Well, as we chat together, I'm reflecting on how different I know intellectually our culture's understanding of time and punctuality is from a lot of other places in the world, and I know that those are cultural constructs, that they are not universal across the world and even how our own culture's understandings of time and punctuality are pretty clearly brought to us by capitalism, by colonialism—but I find them some of the hardest things to let go of in all of the unpacking I've done in those areas of my life. I really struggle to let myself be lenient with timeliness and punctuality. I still feel myself

very wrapped up in those areas. Not abiding by them the way I wish I could, or the way it's expected in certain spaces, is not a moral failure or something. But yeah, they're an interesting area of life to try to push back against.

We've got some similar very big cosmic questions in the reading that we're going to unpack this week. We have the third Sunday of Advent. As we have tried to remind listeners we are a week off because of the way Advent has fallen this year. So if you are preparing for the third Sunday of Advent, this is the right episode for you. If you are still getting ready for the second Sunday of Advent, we have already published that episode. Just go one back in the list on either our website or your favorite streaming service, but we have some conversation about the gospel of John to have. We don't often get to read the gospels together, so we're excited.

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: The gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent in Year B is John 1:6-8, 19-28...

Annemarie: ...meaning the gap we are exploring is John 1:9-18. I will be reading the assigned verses...

Rebecca: ...and I will be reading the verses that are left out of the lectionary.

Annemarie: 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.

Rebecca: ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He 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.

¹⁴And 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.

Annemarie: ¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' ²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' ²²Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' ²⁶John answered

them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: So it only just occurred to me as we were reading: It's really similar to the gospel for the second Sunday, isn't it?

Annemarie: It is in that we don't have, it's the beginning of the good news, right? If you think about the second Sunday in Advent is—the gospel is the first chapter of Mark where John is describing what his job is.

Rebecca: Yeah, I mean they quote the same piece of Isaiah even.

Annemarie: They do, they do.

Rebecca: You get the entire reference again, I don't know. I think it just strikes me as a little bit of a redundant choice, but maybe I just feel that way because I also think the gap is really beautiful. It's one we don't get all that often, only when we happen to have a second Sunday after Christmas Day, and I bet a lot of us end up replacing it with Epiphany or something like that just because of where it falls on those years. But I can see why those verses get taken out. I'm sure it's because it keeps the focus on John since we're in Advent and we're anticipating Christ's arrival still, but I like the way that when they're in the middle there, and they break up this reading, it emphasizes the way Jesus has to be at the center of John's story. I do think you lose that a little when you take out the gap.

Annemarie: Yeah, I agree. I think that I was looking at this again and realizing that we do get 1-14 of the first chapter when we do the candle lighting on Christmas Eve, and if you were doing Christmas Day worship and you'd used Christmas Day, the second set of readings for Christmas Day, you would get John the first chapter one to 14 as well, but it doesn't go further through. I think what is really—theologically for John, verses 14 through 18 are really setting the tone for John theologically about who Jesus is and how Jesus has existed in relation to Moses. And to establish from the outset that this is the Messiah, right, that this is God incarnate. The words that John has used here are incredibly intentional and really important for the community and for the writer to understand who this Jesus is and who John isn't.

Rebecca: John the Baptist, not John the Evangelist.

Annemarie: John the Baptist, sorry. But it establishes John the Baptist as the witness and not the one who is the Messiah, and that—from what I was reading today—is to help the hearers who it is likely were disciples of John or are people who align themselves with, I'm sorry, John the Baptist, and to make the clarification about who John the Baptist is versus who Jesus is.

Rebecca: I like that you're drawing our attention to his form and his literary style. It is very different than the synoptics. We know this, but I have said sometimes that reading the Gospel of John feels more like reading poetry just in that it is... Metaphor isn't right because it's more tangible than that, but something about the way John writes captures

a spirit that feels closer to poetry than prose to me. And for me it does give the whole Gospel this really interesting tension, because while it can be lofty (“In the beginning was the Word,” and all this kind of stuff) it is also so earthy and incarnate. Even from how graphic John's Passion is, to raising of Lazarus and “he stinketh,” and even these pieces from the gap, the Word becoming flesh and living among us. I think that's something that's really interesting about John's gospel, the way it holds those two things so closely: this lofty, poetic, spiritual realm that it's bringing to us with the graphic earthiness of everything else. And that's kind Christmas in a way, right? That's kind of what Advent is getting us ready for.

Annemarie: That was the other thing I was thinking about, was the placement of this particular piece of John, the Gospel of John on the third Sunday of Advent. I did—because I was reading, because we're in the new Testament and because we're in the Gospel of John, I went to my bookshelves and I had mountains of resources for the Gospel of John. Imagine that. *The Introduction to the New Testament*, Raymond Brown, is a lovely resource. Not the only one I looked at, but it was one of the ones that pointed out—others did this as well—that the beginning of the gospel, the prologue of the Gospel of John, is thought to be a hymn, thought to be a hymn that encapsulates the writer's view of Christ, that Jesus empowers all who accept him to become God's children so that they share in God's fullness, a gift reflecting God's enduring love that outdoes the loving gift of a law through Moses. So there's this important comparison—not comparison, right? It's not metaphor. It's really about the incarnation of God's love coming in a way that has never come before and makes things different than before. What were you going to say?

Rebecca: Well, I was going to say that I think we can say it's metaphor in the way all language is metaphor. I remember sitting in my Gospels class at LSTC and we struggled with metaphor for a while, about what do we literally believe in and what do we representationally believe in? What do we metaphorically believe in? Maybe that's just—it's part of the unpacking that you do in seminary. But there is a way in which you can say all language is metaphor because we are using the limitations of human speech to communicate to one another these massive abstract ideas, and the gap even kind of almost hits on that with the end, of the unfathomableness that we do end up using metaphorical and poetic and hymnic language to try to portray for one another. So I do think we can lean on it in that way and say that it's definitely metaphorical the way all language is.

Annemarie: But I also think this comes to another place, and I mean if we can talk about this a little bit too, because in the rest of Year B, we're going to have John interspersed throughout where the lectionary compilers believed that John or that Mark was lacking, which I don't agree with, but I'm also someone who loves the Gospel of Mark. I think we need to, and I think we'll keep talking about this throughout this Year B time whenever John comes up, but especially in this beginning section of John, I think we need to talk about the antisemitic places or the possible places where we can read antisemitism or interpret antisemitism from what the text is trying to say. I think we need to speak into and caution—I think just we always have to in the Gospel of—any of scripture where we get this dichotomy of “the Jews” and “others,” a seemingly side creating how can we talk about that. Or do we need to talk about that here, do you think?

Rebecca: [Mmm.] John's Gospel is an intra-Jewish conversation. This is not an outside group that is writing a polemic against the Jewish community. This is people who grew up in that

culture, that have family members that are Jewish, that are Jewish themselves, and are trying to figure out what does that look like now that we are also Jesus followers. So I think keeping that context in front of us matters. Keeping that context in front of our congregations matters. I mean, the sad part is this isn't even one of the more egregious pericopes for it, right?

I have at times done a one or two sentence disclaimer before you get into the sermon. It doesn't distract too much. It doesn't take a lot of time. Do one or two sentences just about like, Hey, the Gospel reading today says this. It sounds bad because XYZ here. I don't have time to unpack that today, but you should know this or something like that. I think there are ways to do it that are important, but still flow and are smooth and everything.

Annemarie: For us, I think this is one of those places, the pod is one of those safe places, where we get to talk about some of those things that I'm not sure that everyone always gets a chance to kind of think through. But especially when you get to the pieces of John or pieces of scripture that could be taken other ways. We just need to, it's like a fine-tooth comb. You just got to go through it and just make sure you see all the things and hear, and at the same time zoom out and see the whole picture for what it is and what we need to learn and what is it telling us about God? What is it telling us about God's grace and the nature of God? What is it communicating to us about the nature of God at this point? It's communicating that God became human.

Rebecca: I appreciate your reminder though that John the Gospel is going to show up for us repeatedly in this lectionary year. It's not like we never see John in the other years, but during Mark's, he especially fills in a lot of gaps you might say. I do appreciate the way you reminded us of that and how at the front end of things, then we get John chapter one here in Advent. At the beginning of the liturgical year, we have this opportunity to look at the foundations of this Gospel and everything else it's going to try to say, and there's a lot of really good stuff in the gap. "The Word became flesh and lived among us," I think is one of the most evocative proclamations of the incarnation and is such a distillation—that's way too many "ations" in a row—but is a beautiful way of summarizing everything. I think that verse 18, this admission that no one has ever seen God, I think can be a really powerful thing for people to hear, and there's just a lot of nuggets like that that could be worth dwelling on for a moment in an Advent sermon.

Asking people to look at their own flesh, look at their hands, or think about the hands of their aging parent or think about the soft scalp of their newborn child or grandchild or something. Just thinking about that fleshiness, because like I said at the top, at the center of John the Baptist's story is Jesus. We're holding it off for liturgical reasons, for lectionary reasons. They're keeping the focus on John the Baptist to give this sense of preparation, but the only reason John the Baptist is significant is because of Christ and what God did for us through Jesus. So bringing Jesus into the conversation still matters, even though it's Advent.

Annemarie: And in the Gospel of John that God chose to take on human form. That's the whole of the Gospel in a sentence. The Word lived here. I know this is usually your territory, but the word lived also can be translated dwelt or I like tabernacled. I love to make verbs of things that are not always verbs.

This transcript was exported on Dec 02, 2023.

Rebecca: Tented, also tented!

Annemarie: Well, and I think that really evokes some really cool images of what God is doing, right? God is setting up camp. You're dwelling somewhere. As Someone who has recently moved into a new home, tenting creating a space for oneself to live, right? Not just visit, right? This isn't just a fly by night, one time only kind of moment. This is God's going to dwell in the world and God's going to take on all that the world is going to throw at God and God's going to do it not as a superhuman all-powerful thing, being. God's going to do it as a human. That can be really comforting.

Music: <outro music>

Rebecca: Thank you so much for listening to our conversation this week. We hope that by minding the gap, you heard something that gave you a new insight, appreciation, or question about scripture.

Annemarie: Now, your job is to find us @MindtheGapRCL on Instagram. Visit our website, mindthegaprcl.com, and if you really love us, support us using Ko-fi or Patreon. Share us with all your friends and colleagues.

Rebecca: Blessings on your preaching friends. And may the word of God dwell in you richly.

Music: <outro music>

Annemarie: The Gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent in Year B is John the first chapter. I have to stop. That was really silly.

Rebecca: Okay, fair enough. [laughter]

Annemarie: I really want to do, "The Academy award goes to!"

Rebecca: I'll do the drumroll. [fake drumroll]

Annemarie: Definitely, it just feels like every time I read it—

Rebecca: Now I'm thinking of the National Lampoon's Christmas vacation scene where they do the drumroll before they try to plug in the lights.

Annemarie: That often is how our anticipation is met. [laughter]

Rebecca: Imagine if that was the Gospel acclamation! [laughter]