

Some years ago, I had a conversation with an old friend who had been, for many years, teaching optics at the graduate level.

Now, you need to know: though I enjoyed physics in high school, it was definitely not my first language. Anyway, we were driving to the airport late in the afternoon and ended up talking about how polarized sunglasses work. He was explaining that the way they cut down on the glare is by filtering out half of the sun's light waves.

But isn't light a *particle*? I asked. Well, yes, he said. That is also a model for light. In some situations, the *wave* model works better for describing how light behaves; and in others, the *particle* model works better. The fact is that light is neither wave nor particle. Both are ways we can think about, and talk about, light; but neither completely accounts for the "miracle" of light.

So, here you and I are, just about a week after Christmas, with the stable at Bethlehem, courtesy of the Gospel of Luke, still right here, listening to the Gospel of John's version of how Christ came into the world. These first eighteen verses of John 1, which is called "The Prologue", are offering us another model, if you will. A model that is as different from a young woman giving birth in a stable as particles are from waves.

Both Luke's and John's birth narratives describe the miracle of the Incarnation – of God's wrapping Godself in human flesh. Both are necessary and useful for describing the ways in which that miracle works, depending on which of its effects we are looking at.

Luke's model of God's coming into the world is the one we are most familiar with, which is why we tend to forget how truly strange and incredible it really is: God comes in a *child*, a child born in a remote corner of the Roman empire. A child whose parents are homeless, at least temporarily. A child whose first visitors are a few shepherds. A child who is fragile and vulnerable.

In Luke's version, God's move toward humankind demonstrates that clearly "the finite **can** bear the infinite." A *baby can* embody the Holy One who gave it life. What's more, in the life and ministry of the man that baby grows up to be, it will turn out that the humbler the circumstances, the more likely it is that God will show up. Jesus will say, "in as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." And he will align himself with the poor, and those on the margins, so that all the world will know that if we really want to find, and meet, God, we need to be willing to forget all about status, and simply *be*, human to human.

You and I see this model of incarnation working in our own experience, don't we? Whether we are serving at SPY dinners or delivering flowers, or making music at the

Bread and Roses café over the holidays, or caring for a family member or friend who is struggling – sometimes we realize that God is right there.

For me, it's also when insight comes from an unexpected source or a stranger demonstrates generosity and grace. I realize that in those moments too, I have been met by God. Which means, thankfully, that it is okay for me to not always have it all together, or know all the answers. None of us do, right? And when we accept that, you and I are more able to share Christ's presence with one another.

So those are some of the places where Luke's model of the Incarnation fits really well. Like the wave model for light, it doesn't explain everything about this miracle. No model can. But Luke helps us to understand a lot.

So now, how does John's model work? John's version of how God's incarnation in Jesus can seem so mystical, and thick that at least for me it's hard to wrap my head around it.

John tells us that Jesus is the Word that has been with God from the beginning. The Word that participates in creation. The Word that gives life, just like in Genesis, when God says "let there be..." and there is.

Jesus is the Word that is light, that comes into a world that has trouble seeing it. The Word that becomes flesh, and reveals the glory of God, full of grace and truth. And – and this is the kicker – Jesus is the Word that offers us the opportunity to do the same thing that he does. You and I can also reveal God's glory, full of grace and truth. Because in John's model of the Incarnation, Jesus makes us children of God – and therefore siblings of his. Jesus enables us to do and to be what he does and is.

Which is pretty mind-blowing, in my opinion. So how do we connect *this* model with our experience?

I am going to ask you to bear with me, and go back to waves and particles for just a minute. And as a sidebar: I bet some of you out there know a lot more about all this than I do -- I'm going to try not to make a hash of this.

So about the particle model (which is actually called the "photon model", photons being packets of energy that behave like particles): this particle model is *essential* for describing *the laser principle*. The laser principle is about how light is emitted when it interacts with matter.

It turns out that matter can be a light amplifier, when incoming photons stimulate the propagation of more photons, or it can be a light absorber, when incoming photons

disappear into whatever that matter is. We may be tempted to think that a particular material is doing one thing **or** the other, absorbing or amplifying. But in fact, as photons come at it, absorption and amplification go on at the same time.

So what if, in the same way, we think of the Incarnation as “both/and” when it comes to the effect of God coming at us? What if being children of God and siblings of Christ upon whom the Word, that is light, is shining, means that when you and I receive that light, we *both* absorb it and amplify it?

Because it seems to me that John’s model of the Incarnation is describing a kind of two-fold effect of God taking on human flesh. When we become children of God, there is both the inner transformation that takes place as our very being becomes more and more infused with this light, this Word, this presence of God, (that’s the absorption part); *and* there is our projection of that presence out into the world – in our relationships, in our work, in our commitments and our dreams. That’s the amplification part. And both together, describing what “receiving grace upon grace” might mean!

So now bring all this theoretical stuff back down to earth, and think about what absorption and amplification look like in real life. With skin on. We are talking about Incarnation, right?

So what are some of the ways that you and I take in that incoming Word that is light? Well, we practice. And by practice, I mean anything we do that cultivates our ability to tune in to God. Mindfulness, meditation, being in a small group, getting out into nature, being creative, working with others for some purpose to which we feel called...

And for the amplification part: how do we leverage that incoming beam? I think this has to be a conscious commitment, that we try to work out daily. Every interaction and every activity is an opportunity to express, and thereby expand, the love and compassion and grace that you and I have received. Sometimes it’s as simple as just being willing to talk about it. Sometimes more intentional, effortful compassion and humility are required.

Friends, the point of all of this is, and what both models are saying is, the Incarnation is not just at Christmas – even if we do stretch the season out for all twelve days. Christ keeps being born in the places we least expect in our world and in us. The Word that is light keeps coming into our hearts and minds, transforming us, from the inside out and shining through and beyond us. It’s going on *all the time*.

So as this new year dawns – and as each new day dawns maybe you and I can move into it with a renewed resolve to watch for and welcome the myriad of ways in which God comes...

We might even, whenever we put on a pair of sunglasses, (which is, thanks be to God, happens pretty frequently on the west side of LA) whenever we do that, remember:

Absorb – amplify – shine the light!