



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

A Teacher and Friend of Mine Named Mr. Hill
First Sunday after Christmas Day, Year C, John 1:1-18
December 29, 2024
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

When we lived in Santa Fe, Ruthie worked as a realtor. Bill, her broker, knew that I had been the manager of a construction company. One day he said, 'Ruthie, we need to build some new bookshelves for our office. It will be easy. Paul and I can knock this out over a weekend.' Ruthie fell out laughing. When she composed herself, she said, 'My Paul? Yes, he owned a commercial construction company - but he was a paper-pusher. I'm the handyman at our house! The one with the tool box. Trust me, you don't want Paul anywhere near power tools!'

I've never been mechanical or good with my hands. Ironically, one of my favorite teachers was Mr. Hill, the vocational-agriculture instructor who taught the shop class. He was very patient with me and by the grace of God and Mr. Hill, I passed his class without maiming myself or anyone else. You would think that after teaching me a subject in which I clearly had no interest or aptitude, he would have been glad to be rid of me as a student.

Instead, Mr. Hill took the time and made the effort to recognize and bring out other gifts in me as he did with all the other students. He saw gifts for public speaking and leadership in me that, as a shy teenager, I could not see or even possibly imagine. Teaching, for Mr. Hill, was more than leading a class for an hour. It was a springboard for building lifelong relationships.

Today's Gospel passage, the prologue of John, does not begin with an event, but by bringing us inside an eternal journey. We learn that Jesus was already present with God in the beginning, long before the birth event in the manger we celebrated earlier this week. Jesus is the Word or, in Greek, the Logos - the animating force that brings all creation into being. He brings forth life and light - light that penetrates and overcomes the darkness.

The Word becomes flesh -
God becomes human.

This is the incarnation – the embodiment of God as human in the person of Jesus. John writes that all who receive Jesus, he gives power to become children of God. The incarnation is not just God becoming human in Jesus. The incarnation is God becoming human in each one of us. Then each of us see and illuminate the God-presence in one another.

Mr. Hill saw that God-presence and illuminated the divine spark in all of us. Years after our time together in his shop class, he and I worked together with others in starting a Habitat for Humanity affiliate in Lawrence County, our rural area in south central Mississippi. This was the first major initiative in which Black and White churches in our county worked on a project together.

Mr. Hill, as a leader in his African-American congregation, invited friends from across the county to join in this effort. He volunteered to chair the Family Selection Committee, the group charged with interviewing potential homeowners. The committee selected Laura, a single mother, to be our first homeowner, Mr. Hill understood better than anyone that we were not simply to build a house for Laura and her children, but build a lasting relationship with her and her family. He invited Laura to participate in our monthly meetings. She was honored to be included. Mr. Hill learned all that he could about Laura and her children and arranged for house-warming gifts that they could use and would love. He also worked with her to pay the gift of her home forward by helping plan and build the homes of others. Laura did so joyfully.

While Mr. Hill was a tall, imposing man, he possessed a kind, gentle spirit and an embracing smile. As we faced a number of obstacles along the way, Mr. Hill would help us find a way through or around them. He was a constant source of wisdom and encouragement to me and the other leaders of this ministry. He was still shining a light on gifts we didn't know we had- illuminating a God-presence that was always around us and always within us.

When I moved away and began a journey in vocational discernment toward ordination, Mr. Hill was delighted and wrote letters of recommendation to seminaries on my behalf. He took on the major responsibilities for leading Habitat, eventually becoming its executive director. While I would always see him as my teacher, over time he had become my lifelong friend.

Perhaps the most important part of the prologue of John is one little phrase: 'He lived among us.' The incarnation was not a one-time event for Jesus. It *is* a springboard for entering relationships with us – relationships that are lasting, relationships that are timeless.

Then he nurtures those same relationships among us. The prologue sets the tone for the rest of the Gospel of John in which Jesus later says to his followers, 'I no longer call you servants, but call you friends.'

Mr. Hill suffered from cancer in his later years. He still made phone calls and sent encouraging notes to me and other students, who were now his friends. Reaching out to share light with others may have been part of the way he found light in the darkness himself.

Mr. Hill died this past October. Ruthie and I went to his funeral in his home city of Vicksburg. A number of former students offered tributes to him. After one described all the time, the encouragement, the wisdom Mr. Hill had offered her over the years, the next speaker got up and said, 'Dang. I thought I was the only one.'

Phillips Brooks, a 19th century Episcopal bishop who wrote 'O Little Town of Bethlehem,' was once asked what he considered the greatest proof of the truth of Christianity. Bishop Brooks is considered one of the greatest Episcopal preachers of all time. And 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' is a masterpiece among the Christmas carols. He was an artist with words, and I can imagine his questioner expecting Bishop Brooks to give his answer by weaving together Holy Scripture and philosophy in a masterful and eloquent proof of Christianity. Do you know what his answer was? 'An aunt of mine who lives in New Hampshire.'

Instead of using a lot of words, Bishop Brooks pointed to a flesh-and-blood person, someone with whom he had a transformative relationship, as the proof that Christianity is true. If asked the same question, one of my answers would be 'A teacher and friend of mine named Mr. Hill.' What would your answer be? Or better yet, would any of us or would Calvary as a community be someone else's answer as the proof that Christianity is true?

Another great teacher said, "Deep within each of us is a spark of the divine just waiting to be used to light up a dark place." *Amen.*