The article on Christmas Eve captured attention with its title:

“*The people who challenged my atheism most were drug addicts and prostitutes.*”

Chris Arnade was a 16-year old working on a custodial crew one summer, saving money for college, when he encountered a fellow worker named “Preacher Man.”

“Preacher Man would question me, ‘What do you believe in?’ I would decline to engage—but he pressed me. Finally I broke, ‘I am an atheist. I don’t believe in a God’.”

“Preacher Man's eyes narrowed. He pointed at me, 'You are an APE-IEST. You going to lead a life of sin and end in hell.'”

Arnade eventually received a PhD in physics, and then worked on Wall Street for 20 years. A life devoted to rational thought and data.

He finally left Wall Street and started working with and photographing homeless addicts in the South Bronx.

“When I first walked into the Bronx I assumed I would find my same cynicism towards faith.” Arnade says.
“If anyone seemed the perfect candidate for atheism
it was the addicts who see daily how unfair,
unjust, and evil the world can be.

**But, NONE of them are.**
Rather they are some of the strongest believers I have met…”

“The first addict I met was Takeesha.
We talked for an hour before I took her picture.
When we finished, I asked her how she wanted to be described.
She said without any pause,
"As who I am. A prostitute, a mother of six, and a child of God."

“Sonya and Eric, homeless heroin addicts,
have a picture of the Last Supper that moves with them.
It has hung in an abandoned building,
in a sewage-filled basement,
and it now leans against the pole in the small space
under the interstate where they live.

“Sarah, 15 years on the streets, wears a cross around her neck. *Always.*
Michael, 30 years on the streets, carries a rosary in his pocket. *Always.*”

Arnade observes:
“Takeesha and the other homeless addicts...are viewed
by almost everyone as losers.

They have their faith because what they believe in doesn't judge them.
Who am I to tell them that what they believe is irrational?
Who am I to tell them the one thing that gives them hope
and allows them to find some beauty in an awful world
is inconsistent?
It would be cruel and pointless.

“In these last three years, I have been reminded that life is NOT rational
and that everyone makes mistakes.
Or, in Biblical terms, we are all sinners.

On the streets these addicts,
with their daily battles and proximity to death,
have come to understand this viscerally.

*Many successful people don't.*
Our sense of entitlement and emotional distance
has numbed our understanding of our fallibility.

I look back at my 16-year-old self
and see Preacher Man and his listeners differently.

I look at the fragile woman praying
and see a mother working a minimum wage custodial job,
trying to raise three children alone.

I look at the teenager fingering a small cross and see a young woman,
abused by a father addicted to whatever,
trying to find some moments of peace.

I see Preacher Man himself,
living in a beat up shack without electricity,
desperate to stay clean,
desperate to make sense of a world that has given him little.

They all found hope where they could.¹

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Leaving one of his weekly audiences,
Pope Francis stopped in front of a woman
whose tears streaked her face.
As Francis reached for her hand,
she whispered something into his ear.
Francis looked startled, drew back a bit, then turned to her partner.

The Pope embraced him, then drew the woman in.

Then Francis placed his hands on the man’s head.
The man’s shoulders shook slightly.
The Pope made a sign of the cross above them and moved on.

The man was weeping.
The woman said,

“My husband has a brain tumor for the last four and a half years.
He’s getting worse and worse.
We came just for this, for his blessing, whatever it is—physical, emotional, or spiritual.”

Those are pictures of faith.

But... it is a picture that is challenging for many of us whose lives, like Chris Arnade, are largely shaped by rational thought and careful logic.

How are we to know God?

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Rembrandt’s painting, "Holy Family”—on the bulletin cover—sets the nativity in the 17th century.
The attire and furnishings are what one would find in a typical Dutch home in Rembrandt's day.

Mary is seated with a well-thumbed Bible held open by her left hand.
Her right hand is on the top of a cradle, sheltering a soundly sleeping Jesus.

Mary's head is turned from the book to gaze upon the infant.
Immediately behind her and in much fainter light is Joseph, working over a piece of wood.

How do we encounter and understand the Word of God?

There is the Bible, the book Mary is reading as Jesus sleeps and Joseph works in the background...

...But, Mary does NOT ponder the page alone.
   The Word engages her mind by the book—
   --and claims her heart in caring for her child—
   --“the Word made flesh.”

   Go too far one way—or the other—and our lives and faith end up lost in distortion.

Compared to the nativity stories,
   John's opening words, as magnificent as they are,
   have a more distant, reflective, intellectual ring to them.³

But then John startles us:
   “What has come into being in him was life,
   and the life was the light of all people.
   The light shines in the darkness,
   and the darkness did not overcome it.”

For John, Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh--is known...
   ...both in poetry that echoes creation’s promise—
   --AND in a presence as immediate as the last time we feared the dark.

   *************

For a presentation she had to do for her class on DARKNESS,
   a student located an old, never used racquetball court,
   only reached by going down flights of stairs to the basement,
   through heavy doors—
--sealed off from the outside world—
  --devoid of any sunlight.

For her presentation, she led her class down those stairs,
  through those heavy doors—
--to this room that no one knew was there—
  --and she turned out the lights.

...And then they all sat...and sat...and sat some more...in total darkness.

After five minutes—which seemed like five HOURS—
  --she finally lit a match.

Some classmates stood in wonder;
Others couldn’t wait to get out.
  More than a few had tears running down their face.4

It was a great lesson about the impact a little light can have...
  but it was ALSO a lesson about darkness.

**Darkness is powerful**—
  BUT John wants us to know that, just so:
  we must NEVER underestimate the LIGHT.

*For ALL the discernment and intellect we can deploy in life*—
  --still sometimes, we are no better than a lost soul
  sitting in the dark...waiting for LIGHT.

There are OTHER moments in life—using our intellect and discernment--
  --superstition is sent packing by the Word of God
  cutting through all shallowness
  and calling us to a deeper, more engaging place.

**To know God with depth**—is a gift.
  ...So, too, is to trust God to bring LIGHT to darkness.
How do we know God?
...Alas, back to Chris Arnade’s observation
about how some of us lose touch with our fallibility—
it is TOO EASY to conclude that the answer to that question
is ALL on us...

BUT--it begins with God—the Word made flesh—knowing us...

Annie Dillard tells about the Christmas...
....when her nephew Will was just on the verge of speech.

Fourteen months old, Will commanded
a wide range of shrieks and syllables, but no real words yet—
--and at times that really frustrated him.

He was the only grandchild,
meaning he lived in the company of adults
who filled the air with words he could not understand.

Feeling left out of conversations, Will was about to start howling
when someone began singing to him.

Dillard recounts: “I don’t know who started it,
but in a second we all joined in a spirited round of "Jingle Bells"—
--and Will shut right up.

“He stared at us with his mouth open a little,
mesmerized by the sight and sound of eight large people
all making the same loud noise in his direction at once.

"Wheel!" he yelled when we were through, and the game was on.
"He means “We Three Kings,” someone said,
so we sang that and again he listened without moving a muscle.

"Oh," he said when we were through,
so we sang "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."
"Da!" he said after that, and we sang "Deck the Halls."
On it went, with Will directing from his highchair...
  ...absolutely incredulous that we had so many words in us--
   --words that he could not say or understand--
   --but words that he commanded nonetheless, words that he brought into being with words of his own, such as they were.

...Now, what makes that such a wonderful moment?
It’s something about a little child leading a bunch of adults.

Beyond that, there is something about our own poor efforts at speaking to God—
   --us from our highchairs to the God of the universe—

   --and about how all our BEST words and BEST thoughts must sound like gibberish, and how it really does NOT matter after all—

   --because God listens intently to
   the entire grammar of our life—
     --our kindnesses and cruelties,
     our hits and misses,
     our doubts and certainties,
     our superstitions and half-baked hopes,
     our anxieties and our joys!

With God—NONE of our rough words or phrases—
  —defines us or hems us in—

   --because we are deep in conversation
   with the Word made flesh,
   who is still living among us,
   full of grace and truth.

Just like Mary in Rembrandt’s masterpiece—
   --we turn to the Word of God in scripture, and we study and learn and discern and follow...
...and we turn to Jesus—
   --and by our experience of him,
   we encounter love
   and learn discipleship.

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The Jewish Talmud says:
“A human being always seeks what they have lost.”

The actor Stephen Tobolowsky once said that the best acting advice he ever received was:

“People don’t need to see anything clever.
   They just need to experience something TRUE.”

This morning, in this text, John offers us the TRUE WORD.

In Hebrew, the term that is translated “WORD”—
   --is actually used for both “word” and “deed.”

You see, the question is never just: How are we to know God?
   It’s ALSO: What do we DO about this WORD?

It’s what Dorothy Day talked about:

“It is no use saying that we are born 2000 years too late
   to give room to Christ.
Nor will those who live at the end of the world
   have been born too late.
Christ is always with us--always asking for room in our hearts.

“But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks;
   with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers,
   and children that he gazes;
   with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers,
   and suburban housewives that he gives.
It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ.”

God gives you the Word made flesh—understood through mind and heart—and then gives you the TASK...of becoming, yourself, LIGHT in darkness.

* * * * * * *

The promise of John’s Gospel is for everyone who searches, every person who yearns to know God:

If you are lost, God will find you.
If you are in darkness, God is the LIGHT.
If you need to find understanding—
  --God provides a lived answer to your searching.

Because the TRUEST thing in all creation we know how to say is:

“What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Amen.

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1 “The people who challenged my atheism most were drug addicts and prostitutes” by Chris Arnade, The Guardian, December 24, 2013
3 Thomas Troeger, Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration
5 Dorothy Day, quoted in “The Daily Dig” by Plough, December 17, 2013