

Sunday, December 30, 2018

First Sunday after Christmas

John 1.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

In this Christmas season, while we still (hopefully) are basking in the joy of standing at the foot of the manger with shepherds and animals alike, gazing with adoration upon a precious child who has just been born, wrapped in strips of cloth, watched over by Mary and Joseph bursting with love, it can be a little jarring to shift gears and to try to take in John's version of what happened in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. The Prologue to John's Gospel bears little resemblance—actually, no resemblance—to Luke's account of Jesus' birth. But while John's account may lack a sense of the warm and fuzzy that we so like this time of year, he makes up for by getting at the true heart of what Christmas is all about.

John summarizes the heart of his Christmas message: "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" (Jn 1.14). The Prologue, with its poetic language about the Word, is, in fact, the most complete statement of the mystery of the Incarnation. Even when it is a little less than obvious as to the depth of its meaning. But such is the work of poetry. To use imagery contained in the written or spoken word to stir the imagination, to draw the hearer into a new and different way of viewing reality.

In John's work, the word used to help transport us to a deeper understanding is "Word"—with a capital W. "Word" as the image or vehicle used to convey the reality of who Jesus is as the Son of God, is quite intentional. In the Hebrew tradition, the spoken word is a living entity, dynamically conveying a truth and power of its own. The source of that truth and power is rooted in the very personality of the person uttering that word. So much so that the word spoken bestows or conveys the reality that the word itself signifies. So in Hebrew thought, the Word is a perfect image for God. For God spoke all creation into being with a word. God spoke humanity into creation: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1.26). And when it came time for God to come in the flesh to be among us, the Word (capital W) spoken into being by God carried with it all the truth and power of God himself. The Word made flesh, full of his glory, full of his grace and truth. Grace and truth that came through and in the form of Jesus Christ.

But it's not just God's grace and truth that are conveyed by Jesus. Thanks to the influence of the ancient Greeks, this image of Christ as Word carried an even deeper meaning. Word, or in Greek, *Logos*, is a key concept in the philosophical tradition that helped the Greeks see how all creation was ordered. Inherited by the early Christians, it was a small step to go from the concept of *Logos* as the ordering force of creation to seeing that concept manifest in Jesus as the Word. Jesus, as the Son of God, being the one who orders creation. Jesus, the Word who was from the very beginning of creation. In the Word made flesh, Jesus came into the very world he had created. And just as the Word is the organizing or mediating power of creation, Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the organizing and mediating power for those of us who receive this Word in our own lives. Giving meaning to our lives.

Just as God brought order out of chaos and nothingness by simply speaking things into existence, Jesus as the Word made flesh, seeks to bring order out of the chaos of our lives through the hope and promise of salvation. This was the plan from the beginning of creation. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn 1.3b-4). Not just physical life, but life and light that shines forth as a beacon for all. A path to salvation and eternal life only made possible through him. As we are told, “He came to what was his own . . . [and] to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1.11-12). Jesus became one of us so that we could see, hear, and touch God in the flesh. So that we could fully experience and participate in God’s unbounded love for us. A love that extends from the beginning of creation, through the present, and into the future, where we will continue to live in the glory of eternal life.

Of the poetic language John uses to describe Jesus coming among us, Luci Shaw, herself a poet, writes “In the Incarnation, Christ became a living metaphor—the Word. Jesus took the risk of reducing himself to what we could see and touch and listen to, a living message that bridged the huge communication gap between deity and humankind.” (*Synthesis*, Christmas 1, 12/30/18). That the Word made flesh seeks to communicate the depth of his love for us, of what he accomplishes for us through his own life, death, and resurrection.

But the communication of his love does not stop with the act of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The communication of his love does not cease with the events we witness and experience this time of year.

One aspect of John’s Prologue that seems to get overlooked in our emphasis on God conveying himself to us through the birth of his Son is found in the person of John the Baptist, whose presence is interspersed throughout the Prologue. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (Jn 1.6-7). That this John—John the Baptist—bears witness to the light that is the Word made flesh so that all who hear his message might come to know God in the flesh and be recipients of the light and life that he provides. That through his testimony, we might further understand what it is that happens at Christmas.

To be sure, this is not a one-off event. The message does not end with John’s proclamation of the Word made flesh. The message does not end with John the Baptist witnessing to the light. John the Baptist had the express mission of keeping the message alive. That proclaiming the Word is central to who we are as Christians. That just as Jesus is the embodiment of the Word, is the Word made flesh, so too are we called to embody the Word in our own words and action. That we are called to continually proclaim the Gospel message.

Just as the Hebrews believed the spoken word to be a dynamic, living entity that speaks into being a power and truth of its own, so too is our own proclamation of the Gospel the speaking into reality the power and truth of God’s love. The Word made flesh enables those who follow him to embody God’s word in their own lives. To be a witness to the power of God’s love put into action.

Everyone has a word that he or she has a gift for bringing to life. Everyone has a word of their own that gives flesh to their own experience of and relationship with God. When we seek to live the Gospel, it's not always about the words we say but the flesh we put on those words. About how we embody the Gospel and its message of God's love. We see this most vividly in the example of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. How her words and particularly her actions conveyed a deep sense of compassion for the least of God's beloved children. We see this in the lives of those around us who embody through their actions the message of love, mercy, justice, generosity, hospitality, service, and prayerfulness.

And it's not just individuals who embody the Word made flesh in their words and actions. Congregations also have their own ways of living into the Gospel, of embodying the Gospel in their own unique ministries. All Saints, Pasadena is particularly known for embodying the Word through their acts of social justice. Other places do this through inspiring worship, exemplary educational opportunities, or through outreach. Here at St. Gregory's, we particularly embody the Word through our ministries of hospitality, pastoral care, and outreach.

The good news is that we aren't expected to do it all. While we are called to live the Gospel, we are only called to put flesh on a few of those words. To embody those words of the Gospel that reflect our own experiences of God's love. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, we all have different gifts. That there is one body, the Body of Christ serving as the embodiment of the Word made flesh in the world, with many parts. All of which are valuable and needed. For without all of us, each conveying our own embodiment of the Word in our own ministries, we have an incomplete picture of why God the Word became flesh and came to dwell among us.

"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." The Word became flesh and dwelt among us in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. His Word is conveyed to us through the Church, and through those who have ministered to us. His Word continues to be conveyed through us to all those we encounter and minister to. In this, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (Jn 1.16).

This is the gift we receive, and the gift we give, at Christmas and throughout the year.

Merry Christmas!