

Wednesday, December 25, 2019

Christmas Day

John 1.1-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Real Christmas Story”

On Christmas Eve we hear the angels proclaim to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” (Lk 2.10-12). That’s the entire story of the nativity in a nutshell. The rest is just detail.

But now, in the stillness of Christmas Day, after the angels have gone back to their Heavenly home, after the shepherds have gone back to their fields, after all the adoring crowds at the manger have dispersed, we face the dawning of a new day—literally and figuratively. This is a day unlike any other that has come before in all of history. A new day that is the beginning of a new era in salvation history. “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).

While the story of what happened last night—the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem, a birth announced by angels, witnessed by shepherds—is beautiful and poetic and very moving, it really does not tell the whole story of what this awesome event is really about. Not by a long shot.

Now there’s no denying the events of Christmas Eve are important. After all, it is the birth of our Lord. However, all that we are really told is what the angels tell the shepherds. That “to [us] a child is born . . . a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” The full ramifications of that proclamation were not readily apparent at the time. Up to this point, and even beyond, through Jesus’ life, there was not a clear understanding of him as Messiah. Up to this point, the common understanding of Messiah was a human savior, a liberator of the people, who would be a political and military figure in the model of King David.

What we see revealed in today’s Gospel reading with its cryptic language of “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” and then that “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” more fully explains just what did happen at that manger in Bethlehem last night. And it does so in a big way. This is a revelation of something entirely new. The revelation of something radical. An entirely new understanding of Messiah. That the Messiah is not a human political and military figure but that the Messiah is actually God incarnate. God come in the flesh to be with us. This is a radically different understanding. Of Messiah and of God. As a result, the coming of the Messiah—Jesus’ birth as the Messiah—takes on a whole new meaning. One that the world had not even been able to imagine was possible. That God actually became human. God was viewed as this distant being that was to be held in awe, to be feared, who was all-powerful. But now God is actually present in human form, living among his people. That he came in such a lowly way to a backwater town in a backwater province says something about who this God is. That this God in the flesh did not come to be a

mighty political and military figure, that he did not come to be among the elite, that he did not come to be served, but instead came to be among the people. To be one of us, just as we are.

As the Prologue to John's Gospel says, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (Jn 1.9). But even more than that, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1.12-13). That this God-in-the-flesh was coming to be a light shining in the darkness of our current reality. Exposing what is hidden in the darkness so as to enlighten us, to give us a true picture of how things are and of how things can be. Of how things will be, now that our God is living among us. A light shining in that darkness to show us a new way. A light shining in the darkness transforming the world in a way that only God could do. Something that God had been trying to do since the beginning of creation. Except, we kept getting in the way.

But even more so, this is something that could only be accomplished in a direct, hands-on way, through relationship with God's people. This itself is significant. God could have chosen to use a top-down type of approach, snapping his fingers and causing there to be peace and joy throughout the world. But God did not chose to do that. Because God created us to have freewill. Rather than snap his fingers, God wants us to willingly be part of the transformation. To be integral to that transformation. This is all really about relationship, about partnership. That God can only bring about true transformation of the darkness into light in partnership with us. That God needs us to help bring this about; for this new age, this transformed reality, to really take hold. To become part of who we are as the people of God.

Central to all of this, even though it is not specifically stated in John's Prologue, is love. God did all of this out of love for us. For his beloved children. God came in the flesh to be with us, out of love. God came to bring light to the darkness out of love. So that we would no longer live in darkness, but live in the light. And the light that he brings to vanquish the darkness is the power of his love. A love made manifest through his Son, Emmanuel, God with us.

This is God's Christmas gift to us. And our Christmas gift to him and to the world is to shine the light of his love, to share his love, in our own lives. To help spread the light of the truth of his love to further dispel the darkness that still makes its presence felt in the world.

Today is the dawn of a new day, a new era, because "the Word became flesh and lived among us," and continues to live within us and through us, overcoming the darkness in our own lives and the world around us.

Merry Christmas!