

Monday, December 25, 2017

Christmas Day

John 1.1-14

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Last night, on Christmas Eve, we heard what is considered the iconic story of the Incarnation. The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Of a young woman nine months pregnant and her husband traveling to Bethlehem for the purpose of enrolling in a mandated census. Upon arriving in Bethlehem, it comes time for her to deliver her child. But there are so many people in town for the census that there is no room in any of the inns for them to have a proper place to stay. All that is available is a stable filled with animals. She needs some place to give birth, so this would have to do. So there she gives birth to her baby – the One foretold by the prophets. An event that is announced to shepherds in the field outside of town by an angel proclaiming, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." A birth heralded by choirs of the heavenly hosts singing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Upon hearing the glorious news, the shepherds rush to the manger in Bethlehem to witness this wondrous event. As they look on the baby with adoring eyes, they see the truth for themselves, and excitedly tell of the angelic visitation and the message of joy and hope the angels proclaimed.

But this morning, the shepherds have gone back to their fields. The angels have returned to their heavenly realm. And we are given a different storyline. A story that starts out "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That "He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him." That "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." And then concludes with "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."

How are these even the same story? They bear no resemblance to each other. Today's story is so much more abstract than the one heard last night. The only thing even remotely resembling anything about a birth is the last statement: "the Word became flesh and lived among us." Yet, we are told that both stories celebrate the same event.

The lectionary for Christmas, with its two different versions of the Christmas story, of the Incarnation, conveys what is theologically known as the "two natures of Christ." That Jesus is fully human and fully divine. On Christmas Eve we hear about a newborn baby – symbolizing the fully human part. And then on Christmas Day, we hear about God, the source of life and light, coming to dwell among us with grace and truth – symbolizing the fully divine part. In reality, these two stories are indeed the same story, told in different ways. Or rather, at least from our perspective, they may more aptly be considered two halves that make up the whole story. That convey the reality of the coming of Jesus Christ, Son of God, as fully human and fully divine.

While last night's "half" of the story might be more accessible, more relatable, to us humans – after all, what is more endearing to our hearts than a beautiful newborn baby surrounded by loving parents and adoring onlookers – we nonetheless need today's "half" of the story to fully

appreciate the magnitude, the significance, of what we have witnessed. “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” The Word, as John tells us, that was from the beginning. The Word through whom all things came into being – through whom all creation, including us, came into existence. The Word being critical, essential, for our very existence. The Word, invoking the image of the creation myth in Genesis. The Word that existed from before the beginning, present as God spoke another word, “Let there be light,” beginning the whole process of creation. The Word who is the light and life of all of us.

The use of the descriptor “Word” may seem an unfortunate one, at least to our ears. Compared with the warm and fuzzy image of baby in the manger, the Word is so cold, so clinical, so inaccessible. Yet, for the time in which this image of Christ as Word was crafted, it made perfect sense. 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* 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. When placed side-by-side with the story of creation, with the Word, as the power ordering creation, that is now come in the flesh, something critically important is revealed. That in the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, the world has been created anew. By virtue of the fact that the Creator became one of the created. That the Creator, being in the flesh, is God alive in glory and active among humankind. That in this new human form, God brings light into the world. Just as God spoke light into being at the beginning of creation.

John’s Gospel in particular guided the Church into the mystery of the Incarnation. In the Church’s understanding of the meaning of the Incarnation. Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is the Word of God. Jesus is God in the flesh. On Christmas Day the Church moves from the warm and fuzzy narrative of Bethlehem to the central tenant of the Christian faith, that Jesus is God. Not just in this event, but that he has been God from before the creation of the world. Christmas celebrates the fact that in the act of the Word becoming flesh, all of creation is made new. That a new light shines in the darkness, overcoming the darkness.

While Luke’s birth narrative proclaims “good news of great joy” in a tangible way – through the birth of a child – today’s account from John’s Prologue reveals just what this good news is. Reveals why this is cause for great joy. That in the birth of this child, the Word is made flesh and is now living among us. That God, for so long deemed to be “out there,” often deemed as inaccessible, has come to be as we are – fully human. To share our life. To experience what we experience. And being fully divine, has brought light, grace, and truth into our midst so that we might experience God face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. And in the process, creation, and we ourselves, might be made new. That we are made new. That the life and light of the Word now dwells in us and shines through us.

So, you see, we need both halves of the story for this day to truly make sense. The baby born in a manger. The Word spoken out of God’s love. A Word for us to hear. A Word proclaiming a message of hope, a message of renewal, a message of new life. That we might hear the Word, see his glory, and be made new.

Merry Christmas!