

Tuesday, December 25, 2018

Christmas Day

Hebrews 1.1-4; John 1.1-14

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Merry Word-Made-Flesh-mas!

Okay, so that just doesn't seem to have the same ring to it as "Merry Christmas." But then again, our Gospel for Christmas Day, with "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1.1), followed by "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1.14), while poetic, just doesn't seem to have the same ring as the angelic proclamation we heard on Christmas Eve. "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" (Lk 2.10-11). That's always the cognitive disconnect we experience on this day.

Following that moving and inspiring scene, we, like the shepherds, leave the heartwarming scene of Jesus being born in a stable in Bethlehem, surrounded by cute and cuddly animals; the baby, wrapped all snug in bands of cloth and placed in a manger, watched over by adoring shepherds. Our hearts warmed by the memory of a beautiful child surrounded by such love. Like the shepherds, we leave the church and return home "glorifying and praising God for all [we have] heard and seen" (Lk 2.20). And then we wake up on Christmas Day to be confronted with the more sterile image of the Prologue to John's Gospel. Why can't we just stay at the manger, keeping vigil over the adorable Christ Child? Why do we have to shift gears to a radically different image? To an image that cannot be pictured on a Christmas card, but rather is one more aptly suited for presentation for analysis in a seminary theology textbook. The imagery of the nativity scene is one that we can relate to on an emotional and visceral level, while John's version of the "birth narrative," if you could even call it that, is more theological, more cerebral. In a season marked with joy and good cheer, the visceral is going to win out over the cerebral, hands down.

Yet, we really do need to have both images, if we are going to more fully appreciate and understand the significance of Christmas. Because, frankly, the birth narrative from Luke's Gospel, with its quaint bucolic imagery, does not tell the whole story. If anything, it only provides a superficial understanding of what happened on that night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. Luke provides the physical description of what happened, but there is still a piece missing. A piece that is critical to our deeper understanding of what happened and why it happened.

Frankly, if all we had to go on was the Lukan account of Jesus' birth, what we would have is precisely that. The story of and circumstances surrounding the birth of a particular individual. The description of who that individual is is ambiguous, at best. All we know of who he is, who he really is, is from the announcement of the angels. That this individual is "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." While that may tell us that this child is special, it does not tell us just how special. After all, the understanding of the Jews of the time—and even today—is that the Messiah would be a person who would become a great king in the model of King David. One who would be a great warrior and political leader who would liberate the people from

oppression. As special as any messiah would be, Luke could be describing any person born to fulfill that role. Even the angels' use of the title "Lord" isn't that helpful. Lord is an ordinary honorific, that while often used to refer to God, could just as easily refer to a man of great status. So these terms, this description by the angels, only go so far to indicate that this child born in Bethlehem is destined for greatness.

John's Prologue, on the other hands, gives a more accurate picture of who this person is. Of his origins and pedigree. In the Prologue, John never uses the name Jesus. Instead he uses the more ambiguous descriptor of Word—with a capital W. Based on the context, we know that "the Word" refers to Jesus, the Son of God. We believe that Jesus, as the Son of God, is fully human and fully divine. Fully human by virtue of being born of a woman, and fully divine by virtue of being the Son of God. While the imagery contained in the Lukan birth narrative gives us some detail about the human part of Jesus, John's Prologue tells us quite a bit about the divine part of Jesus.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him" (Jn 1.1-3). These first words of the Prologue parallel the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen 1.1-2). John intentionally crafted his description of "the Word" to evoke the image of creation. To convey the fundamental fact that the Word existed even before the creation of the universe and was therefore present at the beginning of creation. The Word was with God, the Creator of all. But while being separate from the Creator, at the same time, the Word was God. An integral part of who God is. While a complicated theological concept, one primarily fit for a Trinity Sunday sermon, this leaves no doubt whatsoever that the one coming into the world is indeed divine.

John goes on to tell us that the reason for the Word coming in the form of Jesus is specifically to be a light to all people, to be a light in the darkness. To bring hope of something better. He came as a promise that this is not all there is. That there is something more than just what we see of creation.

John emphasizes that the Word came to "what was his own"—to the very people that he was instrumental in creating—to provide a connection between the Creator and the Created. To become one of us so as to provide a direct, face-to-face, flesh-to flesh connection between God and humans. That we may be better able to know him directly. So that "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1.12). That by becoming human as we are, he became our brother. And in so doing, we gain the status of beloved children of God.

John summarizes his theological treatise by saying "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). Essentially affirming the dual nature of Christ. That he is Son of God. That he is the means by which God's grace is given to us. That he is the means of revealing the truth of who God is and who we are. That he is the means of revealing God's love for us. That he is the means of God being with us in our everyday lives.

The Word made flesh may not have the beautiful imagery we think of at this time of year. But it does more accurately convey the key truths behind who Jesus is and why he was born into this world. And the Word made flesh does more accurately convey the depth of God's love for us and just how important he views our ongoing relationship with him. And that is precisely why Jesus came. Why the Word became flesh. To reveal the glory of the truth of just how much God loves us. More than mere words can convey. A love that only the Word made flesh can convey.

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