

Monday, December 25, 2023

Christmas Day

John 1.1-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/911641337014475>

(Sermon begins at about 20:40)

“The Why of Christmas”

On Christmas Eve, in the darkness of night, we hear the story of Jesus’ birth in a stable in Bethlehem. The events of which are presented in visual form through the creche, the nativity scene; a common fixture in churches and homes alike. Depicting the newborn Jesus lying in a manger under the watchful and protective gaze of Mary and Joseph; surrounded by adorable animals; all attracting the attention of shepherds, who, while in the fields that night, were visited by an angel proclaiming “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.”

But now, in the light of Christmas Day, the images of the creche fade from view, just as the verses of “Silent Night” have gone silent. Only to be replaced by the Prologue to John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The beautiful images of Christmas Eve being replaced by what are essentially ancient philosophical and theological musings.

I am always struck by this stark comparison. One that is generally the foundation for my Christmas Day sermon. This year, as I thought about the differences in our Gospel readings, about the images conveyed, another image came to mind that seemed an equally appropriate contrast. That of Christmas mornings of my childhood. Not unlike scenes of Christmas mornings that occurred or are occurring even now, in homes across the country and around the world. Children and adults alike, waking up to presents under the beautifully decorated Christmas tree. A Norman Rockwell image of Christmas Eve transitioning into the early hours of Christmas Day. And then, chaos ensues as the presents are ripped open, paper and ribbons and bows strewn all over the living room; new gifts in piles all over the place. In some places, additional mayhem as parents work to assemble toys while the children wait in eager anticipation. Within a short space of time, the picturesque image of Christmas being replaced by a scene of utter mayhem and destruction—leaving the mundane task of cleaning up the detritus and trying to get the living room back into some semblance of order. The joy slowly fading, giving way to the ordinary and the necessary.

That’s kind of what happens with our Gospel readings for these first two celebrations of Christmas. The beautiful, joyful, picturesque images of the birth narrative being replaced with more mundane, obscure concepts that may seem a letdown by comparison.

While the Gospels for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are so very different, they really are part of the same story, just told from different perspectives. The birth narrative from Luke’s Gospel telling the “what.” And the Prologue from John’s Gospel telling the “why.” Telling of the

deeper meaning. Something that we really have to take the time to step back and ponder in the aftermath of the birth narrative.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The term in this passage that we translate as Word is the Greek *logos*. A term that was often used in ancient Greek philosophy to indicate the organizing principles of the universe. The ancients’ understanding that there was something—or someone?—that brought organization and order to the cosmos. A more literal translation of *logos* would be such terms as to put in order, arrange, gather, choose, count, reckon, discern, say, or speak. Some versions of philosophical thought even viewed the *logos* as “an active reason pervading and animating the Universe.”¹ Reminiscent of the account of creation in Genesis, where God speaks creation into being with a word. Where God speaks order into creation, arranging the various elements of creation. And consistent with our understanding of God as being an ongoing and active force in the Universe.

The first part of the Prologue to John’s Gospel lays out the backstory. Intentionally identifying Christ with the Word, as the One who was with God from the beginning of creation. As the one who is himself coequal with God, and therefore an active part in the creation and ordering of all that is. But it is the last portion of the Prologue that we hear this day that is most critical: “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.”

This is the “why,” the deeper meaning of the Christmas story. That the Word, the One who is God, became flesh and lived among us. That the God who is so powerful as to conceive all that is, to create all that is, to provide order to all that is, the source of light and life, who has unlimited power and is unbounded by time and space, chose to move from that place of omnipotence and omnipresence to the limited confines of life as a human being. The even more limiting and debilitating confines of a human baby. The humility, the vulnerability, necessary to accomplish this is beyond our comprehension.

The One unbounded by time and space intentionally choosing to be bound to a specific time and a specific place. The incomprehensible intentionally choosing to take on a form, to be born into a form, that we could actually comprehend. The Creator of the world, now inhabiting the world side-by-side with the created. So that he may be known and that we may be more fully known by him. This is all about establishing relationship. Or rather, strengthening , enriching, deepening the rocky relationship between God and his people.

As John notes, “But 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.” The ultimate “why” of what happened on that night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, was to bring God and God’s people into a deeper, more intimate relationship. That we might become not just creations of God, but children of God. That through the Word made flesh, through Jesus Christ, we have become beloved children. This is accomplished through the life of the Word made flesh. This is accomplished through the death and resurrection of the Word made flesh. This is accomplished through our own personal experiences of the Word made flesh. As John says, “we have seen his glory, the glory of father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” That the totality of what we need to know of God is manifest through his only son.

The one who through his life and ministry, through his death and resurrection, will reveal the grace and truth of who we are as God's beloveds.

The nativity story that we hear from Luke's Gospel on Christmas Eve is a lovely image of what happened that night 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. And while the angel brings to the shepherds a message of "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," in some ways it is merely a reporting of a joyous event. Sure, the birth of the Son of God, but still, really just an objective reporting of an event. There is no explanation (in the moment) of why this is happening or what it means to us. For that, we need other sources to fill in the details. To provide an explanation of what was behind this joyous event. It is only through John's Prologue with its more esoteric and mystical language that we begin to learn the magnitude of what has happened. Not just in cosmic terms, but even more so, what it means in human terms; what it means for us personally.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . 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."

Once the craziness of this Christmas morning passes, after all the presents are opened, after all the wrapping paper and ribbons and bows have been cleaned up, may you have time to reflect on the true gift of this season. That our omnipotent God, the One who created all that is, chose to make himself vulnerable and to be born as a baby; to reveal his glory, his grace, and his truth. That all of this was done out of love for us and to make sure that we know that we were not just created by God, but are and always will be beloved of God.

Merry Christmas!

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logos>