

Sunday, December 31, 2023

First Sunday after Christmas

John 1.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3556511144678361>

(Sermon begins at about 21:00)

“Being the Word Made Flesh”

I find it interesting that in all our worship services during the twelve days of the Christmas season, we usually only hear the narrative of Jesus’ birth from Luke’s Gospel once, that being on Christmas Eve; but that we hear the more esoteric Prologue to John’s Gospel twice, that being on Christmas Day and on the first Sunday after Christmas—that being today. Which should tell us something about what the Church views as most important about this season. That it is not necessarily the birth event itself, but the broader more cosmic meaning of that event. And of its ongoing implications to us in our lives of faith.

This begins to make some sense when you consider the history of the liturgical celebration of Christmas. For the early Church, the primary and most important celebration of the year was not Christmas, but rather, Easter—celebrating Christ’s resurrection. After all, it is the resurrection that ultimately is most significant for us. It is through the resurrection that we obtain the absolute forgiveness of our sins and the promise of new and eternal life. Sure, Jesus, the one who was crucified and resurrected, would have first had to have been born. But the early Church viewed that as a given, with no particular need for celebration. It may have also been due to the fact that for nearly 300 years, Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire and had to be practiced more or less underground. It may have been best to minimize major celebrations. Best not to call attention to what we are doing. However, Christianity was legalized by the Emperor Constantine in 313. And in 338, he declared the day of Christ’s birth to be a national holiday. So the first recorded celebration of Christmas did not even take place until over 300 years after Jesus’ death; nearly 340 years after his birth.

For the early Christians, therefore, the event of Jesus’ birth was not of particular concern. The real emphasis was on the overarching reason for not only his birth, but also his life, and ultimately his death and resurrection. The birth narrative in Luke’s Gospel, while presenting a lovely, even poetic image, really does not say anything about this overarching purpose. Other than the fact that the event was heralded as being “good news of great joy” at the birth of the Messiah. The Prologue from John’s Gospel, on the other hand, would have provided much more insight into the significance of what the birth of Jesus means for humanity. And for God.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” These words, the image of Christ as the Word (capital W) would have spoken volumes to the ancients. In a time where various forms of Greek philosophy abounded and would have been fairly common knowledge, image of the “the Word” would have carried great meaning. The term in this passage that we translate as Word is the Greek *logos*. A term in Greek philosophy indicating the organizing principles of the universe. The ancients’ understanding that there was something

(or someone) that brought organization and order to the cosmos, that brought reason to and animated the Universe in an ongoing way. An image that is reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis, where God speaks creation into being with a word. Where God speaks order into creation, with God being an ongoing and active force in the Universe.

The Prologue to John's Gospel identifies 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 participant in the creation and ordering of all that is. That the Word is actually Christ is made explicit in the verse "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 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, willingly 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 vulnerable confines of a human baby. 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 our previously incomprehensible God may become known to us in a meaningful way, in a personal way. As John notes in the Prologue, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." And in being made more fully known, we, too, are more fully known by him.

John's words provide understanding as to why all this happened. Even more significant than the Word being made flesh and coming among us—spectacular though that may be—is the ultimate reason for this extraordinary act on God's part. For this act of humility and vulnerability on God's part. 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 reason for 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 as of a 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 God is. 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.

As those who, of the will of God, out of God's love for us, have been made beloved children, we have a responsibility to share the proclamation of the Word made flesh in our own lives. After all, the Word was not merely made flesh for the benefit of those who lived in Palestine 2,000

years ago. The Word was made flesh, revealing God's grace, truth, and love for all God's beloveds for all time. As those who, through our faith, through our baptisms, recognize ourselves to be the ongoing Body of Christ in the world, we are not just the inheritors of the Word made flesh. We are also those called to BE the Word made flesh in our own time. Just as the Word became flesh and lived among us in a particular place and a particular time—in first century Palestine—we live our lives in a particular place and a particular time. We are the representatives of that Word made flesh here and now. Just as Christ has made God known to us, we are called to similarly make Christ known.

“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.” The gift we received that first Christmas, that we receive this Christmas, and that we receive every day of our lives, is that our 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.

As those who are beloved of God, as those who recognize ourselves to be the Body of Christ in the world, our Christmas gift to a broken and hurting world, is to be living icons of the Word made flesh in this time and this place, proclaiming God's grace and truth and showing forth God's light and love.

Merry Christmas! And Happy New Year!