

Wednesday, December 25, 2024

Christmas Day

John 1.1-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/994757592462746>

(Sermon begins at about 20:45)

“The Real Work of Christmas”

On Christmas Eve, we stand at the manger, witnessing the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. The One who is destined to be the savior of the world. Such a warm and lovely scene, with Mary and Joseph watching the baby Jesus in adoration. Hearing the shepherds who have also come to witness this earth-shattering event. Telling of how they came to know of this joyous event through the appearance of an angel proclaiming, “I am bringing 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.” Followed by a multitude of the heavenly host appearing and praising God: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” The whole story warming our hearts and filling us with joy.

Then, mere hours later, we hear the Prologue to John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Ending 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.” Certainly poetic words, but hardly pulling at the heartstrings the way the image of a baby Jesus in a manger does. Compared to the birth narrative, John’s Prologue is more esoteric, more theological. Can’t we just stay at the manger a little longer? Why do we have to move on so quickly? Can’t we just stay with the warm and fuzzy and dispense with the theological? Or at least put it off for a little while longer?

Well, the reality is, no. As tempting as it may be, no. We do need to move on. Because we really need both of these Christmas stories—the birth narrative and the Word made flesh—for the Nativity to make complete sense. They are, in actuality, two parts of a greater whole. The birth narrative being the “what” and the “how,” and John’s Prologue providing the “why.” Without the “why” of the Word made flesh, we just have a warm and fuzzy scene of a newborn baby. It could be any baby. At least until the angel provides a little context. But even then . . .

So what is the “why” as laid out in John’s Prologue? For that, we start at the beginning. Literally. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The term in this passage translated as “Word” is the Greek term *logos*. A term used in ancient Greek philosophy to indicate the organizing principles of the universe. The ancients’ understanding that there was something or someone that provided the organization of, brought order to, the cosmos. A more literal translation of *logos* would be such terms as “put in order,” “arrange,” “gather,” even “to say,” or “speak.” Some versions of philosophical thought even viewed the *logos* as “an active reason pervading and animating the Universe.”¹

This understanding reminds us of the account of creation in Genesis, where God speaks creation into being with a word. With a *logos*. Where God speaks order into creation, arranging the various elements of creation. Consistent with our understanding of God as being an ongoing and active creative force in the Universe.

One of the key functions for the Word, one which provides the ultimate “why” for the Word made flesh, for the Nativity, for the coming of God’s Son, is to bring light into the darkness. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” This shifts the narrative from creation in general to what this means for God’s people—for all humanity. That what is being done through creation, that what is being done through the Word, and particularly through the Word made flesh, is for the benefit of humanity. Not the least of which is to be the source of “light [that] shines in the darkness.” That wherever we encounter darkness in our lives, individually or collectively, we have One who seeks to dispel that darkness through the light of his life and through his message of love.

This can only be achieved by bringing that light to the people. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” It is clear that the Word to which the Prologue is referring, the One who is tasked with bringing light in the darkness, is the One we know as the Son of God. Jesus, the One whose birth we celebrate today. “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.” As if to further emphasize this point, as if it weren’t obvious enough already, the Prologue moves this theological concept of the Word into the tangible. Referencing John the Baptist as one who “came to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” That all may believe, that all may come to know and understand who Jesus is, through his witness. Setting the stage for Jesus’ public ministry in which he would share his message of love directly. In which he would model what it means to be a light shining in the darkness.

John points to our being brought into the mystery of the Word made flesh when he writes, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the 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.” One of the primary purposes of the Word made flesh, for the Incarnation, is to provide for the salvation of humanity. As those who have become children of God through the mystery of the Incarnation, through the Word made flesh, we are invited to participate in his ministry of being beacons of light in the dark places of the world. This is more than an invitation. As members of the Body of Christ, this is our duty. As noted in the December 19th entry in the *Living Well Through Advent* devotional we have been using this year, “Whenever we encounter darkness in our world, the light we are called to shine is not our own; it is the Light of Christ that we are to shine into the darkness of injustice.”²

This invitation, this calling, is beautifully expressed in a poem by the American author, theologian, educator, civil rights leader, and mystic Howard Thurman in his poem “The Work of Christmas.”

“The Work of Christmas”

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

These words serve as an expression of the ultimate “why” of the Word who “became flesh and lived among us.” These words provide tangible images of what it means for light to shine in the darkness. “To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people.” Echoing what the heavenly host proclaimed to the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

No, on this Christmas Day, we can’t just stay with the warm and fuzzy image of the manger scene we witnessed last night. We must move on to the “why” of this season. Remembering that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” That the Word made flesh is “the true light, which enlightens everyone.” As those enlightened by him, we have been given “the power to become children of God.” As such, we have our own parts to play to be lights shining in the darkness.

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins.” On this day, when our worship service is completed, when the presents are all opened, when the wrapping paper and ribbons and bows have been cleaned up, when Christmas dinner is over, when the dishes are washed and put away, the work of Christmas begins. Our own work of Christmas really begins.

Merry Christmas!

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

² *Living Well Through Advent 2024: Practicing Peace with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*, ed. Robbin Brent (Madison, WI: Living Compass, 2024), 32.