

Sunday, December 29, 2024

First Sunday after Christmas

Galatians 3.23-24, 4.4-7; John 1.1-18

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/865111299164086>

(Sermon begins at about 18:20)

"Images of Christmas"

If you were to ask people what the definitive image of Christmas is, it might be a toss up between Santa Claus and the baby Jesus in a manger. Asked within a church setting, the vast majority would likely—would hopefully—not answer Santa Claus but would say it is the baby Jesus. Very few—outside of some theology geeks—would likely say the quintessential image of Christmas is the Word made flesh. The image we hear not just once, but twice, during the Christmas season. First on Christmas Day and again on the First Sunday after Christmas. Having this reading presented twice in a twelve-day season says something about the importance, the centrality, of the Word made flesh as an image for Christmas.

Of course, we cannot, nor should we, brush aside the images associated with the Nativity that we heard on Christmas Eve. Where 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.

But why do we so quickly rush past this familiar scene, and a mere hours later, move on to the Prologue to John's Gospel? To hearing "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 the 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? After all, we still have seven more days of Christmas.

Well, the reality is, no. As tempting as it may be, no. We do need to move on. Because we really need both these Christmas stories—the birth narrative and the Word made flesh—for the Nativity, for the Incarnation, 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 . . . And the fact that in this season we hear this same reading twice should give us an indication that the “why” is pretty important to our lives of faith.

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 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 “to speak.” Some versions of philosophical thought even viewed the *logos* as “an active reason pervading and animating the Universe.”¹ Implying a conscious, intelligent being who organizes and arranges the Universe.

This understanding reminds us of the account of creation in Genesis, where God does speak Creation into being with a word, with a divine *logos*. Where God speaks order into Creation, arranging the various elements of Creation. Consistent with our understanding of God as Creator of all that is. 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 all 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 this season. “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 the 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’s Prologue 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. Light breaking into what can otherwise be an existence shrouded in, or at least punctuated by, darkness. 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. This is who we are. We often use the term “Body of Christ” to describe ourselves as those who have become children of God through the Word made flesh. As our reading from Galatians notes, “because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.” Our desire to live more fully into what it means to be children of God, to access Christ’s Spirit within us, to be lights in the darkness, is echoed in our Collect of the Day, which asks God to “Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives.” As his children, as the Body of Christ, we embody the Spirit of the Word made flesh. We are the Word made flesh through him. Being lights shining in the darkness is what we are called to do. Being lights shining in the darkness is who we are called to be.

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 serve as a “to do list,” if you will, for those of us called to be lights in the darkness. 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, during this Christmas season, we can’t just stay with the warm and fuzzy image of the manger scene we witnessed on Christmas Eve. 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 are called 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.” When this Christmas season is over, when the special worship services are completed, when all the gifts have been given and received, when the parties and special get-togethers have passed, when the calendar turns to a new year and we return to our day-to-day lives, the work of Christmas begins. Our own work of Christmas really begins.

Merry Christmas!

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