

Sunday, December 28, 2025

First Sunday of Christmas

John 1.1-18

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“The Why of Christmas 2.0”

During the very short Christmas season—a mere twelve days—we have, sometimes one, at most two, Sundays of Christmas. This provides us with limited opportunities to hear Gospel readings that convey what Christmas, what the Incarnation, is truly about. At most, four, when you consider the birth narrative from Luke’s Gospel which we read on Christmas Eve and the Prologue to John’s Gospel which we read on Christmas Day. Depending on the year and how the calendar falls, only three or four shots to focus on the meaning of the Incarnation. And in those limited opportunities, two are, for the most part, the exact same reading. On Christmas Day and on the first Sunday of Christmas, we hear John’s Prologue. With a slight modification. On Christmas Day, we hear the first 14 verses. On the first Sunday of Christmas, we hear four additional verses.

We generally think of the birth narrative from Luke, of the manger scene in Bethlehem, as the quintessential Christmas story. As the main image for Christmas. After all, that is how we build up to Christmas: adding figures to the creche throughout Advent, with the baby Jesus being added on Christmas Eve. And, of course, the complete birth narrative is read on Christmas Eve. And yet, the focus on John’s Prologue as being one-half to the two-thirds of the Gospels for Christmastide should tell us something. That it is not the birth narrative itself that is the most important image of Christmas. That in actuality, the real quintessential story is that the “Word became flesh and lived among us.”

That’s not to say that the birth narrative and the manger scene is not important. It most certainly is. After all, it is the story of how it all happened. Of how the Word actually became flesh. Something that is far easier for us to relate to than the more abstract concept of the Word. Not to mention, it’s kinda hard to do a Christmas pageant, to re-enact the Christmas story, if you only focused on John’s Gospel. And songs about Jesus being born in a manger and about shepherds tending their flocks and about angels singing “Glory to God in the highest” are more fun and probably sell better than would songs about “In the beginning was the Word.” Christmas would just have a completely different feel to it.

So, in actuality, while the important message may be the fact that “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” perhaps it is easier to enter into that by first starting with the more accessible and joyous scene of the birth narrative on Christmas Eve, and then go from there. We need both the birth narrative and John’s Prologue for it to all make sense. To tell the whole story. Because either one, on its own, is somehow incomplete.

I’m sure most of you remember being taught in school the six journalistic questions including five Ws and one H: who, what, when, where, why, and how. If you only take as the Christmas story the birth narrative from Luke’s Gospel that we hear on Christmas Eve, you will find that it is not really complete journalistically speaking. It addresses four of the Ws, as well as the H.

Who: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, angels, and shepherds.

What: the birth of Jesus.

When: during the census decreed by Emperor Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Where: Bethlehem. More specifically, in a manger.

How: “the time came for [Mary] to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.”

But when it comes to the “why,” there is not much information. Why Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem is in the “when” and the “where.” But any explanation of why the birth of Jesus during this time is so important or why we make such a big deal about it, is largely lacking. Well, there is the announcement by the angel: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” There is that, I suppose. But that is a bit incomplete in terms of the bigger picture. Of why God developed this Incarnation plan in the first place. Not to mention that God is only referenced in passing: that the angels praised God, saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

But there is so much more to the “why” of Christmas. Why this newborn child—sure, the Messiah, but what does that even really mean—why this child is so important. Perhaps the biggest “why” being that this child is the Son of God. That isn’t even mentioned in Luke’s birth narrative. Of course, we get that news at the Annunciation, but even then, we only get that reading on the Fourth Sunday of Advent one out of every three years.

To more fully appreciate and understand who this child is, we need the backstory that is the Gospel for today: the Prologue of John’s Gospel.

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, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people . . .

[T]o 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.

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 Prologue presenting the highlights of salvation history, from before Creation to the time of Jesus’ birth. How the Word, the One who in our Trinitarian understanding of God is the Son, was with God from before time and before Creation. How the Word, the Son, was instrumental

in Creation. That from the beginning the Word, the Son, was destined to play a critical role when it came to relationship between God and Creation—particularly those made in the image and likeness of God: humankind. The Word, the Son, represented as both life and light. The source of life—of our life—and the source of light, of goodness and truth and righteousness that God desires for us. The life and light that we share, by virtue of being made in the image and likeness of God. But also recognizing that darkness has entered the world, corrupting relationship between God and humanity.

This corruption of relationship evidenced in a myriad of ways throughout the Old Testament. A series of attempts by God to create a covenant with humanity to establish and maintain right relationship. Covenants repeatedly broken. Covenants reestablished through God's grace and forgiveness, only to be broken again. Necessitating some means of ultimately overcoming darkness and rekindling the light that burns within God's beloved creatures. To allow for renewal of right relationship between God and his beloveds. Those to whom "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." This continuation of relationship that God established in the Old Testament is highlighted in the additional verses we hear today that are not part of the Christmas Day reading: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth come through Jesus Christ." Emphasizing that relationship between God and humanity is made complete through the One whose birth we celebrate this season.

Borne out of that profound love God has for us, his beloved children, was God's plan to renew right relationship once and for all. The only way that God could establish lasting and meaningful relationship was by becoming one of us. Emmanuel, God with us. The Incarnation. "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." That, "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." That the Word became flesh in the person of the baby born in Bethlehem is the means by which we receive and experience God's grace. That is the ultimate "why" of Christmas. That is the backstory, the ultimate "why" of the events we witnessed in the Gospel account of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. With the birth being important so that we can witness and experience the fulfillment of God's grace. As noted in the last verse of today's Gospel, "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." In this little baby, in the man he would become, we may now know God in the flesh.

Perhaps trying to cover it all, the who, what, when, where, why, and how all in one account, in one service, is a bit much to ask. Perhaps we need to break it down into more manageable pieces. Look at the glorious event as reported in Luke's Gospel. Take some time to cherish the joy and wonder of the birth of Jesus, "who is the Messiah, the Lord." And then, after a night's rest, after a few moments to process what we have witnessed, to be able to step back and look at the weightier matter of "why." A weighty matter that undoubtedly takes several passes to allow us to absorb the enormity of what is happening in the birth of Jesus. Of what this all means for us as those to whom the Incarnate Word "gave power to become children of God." To reflect on the profound love that is embodied in the Incarnation, that is embodied in the baby born in Bethlehem. To be able to step back, to repeatedly return to the puzzling, yet poetic images of John's Prologue. To consider just what it means—what it truly means—that

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and live[s] among us.”

May this holy season provide you with opportunities to ponder and see “his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

Merry Christmas