

First Sunday after Christmas
December 27th, 2009
St. Ann's Church, Old Lyme, CT
Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147:1-9
Galatians 3:25-25; 4:4-7
John 1:1-18

SERMON:

John's magnificent gospel opens with a great hymn, so different from the other Gospels. You've noticed how Matthew, Mark, and Luke each starts his Gospel by setting the story's time and place right in the middle of history. Matthew starts his with Jesus' family tree, with a very strong focus on Jesus' connection to his ancestor, King David. Mark starts his Gospel with an account of John the Baptist's preaching and baptizing in the Jordan River. On Christmas Morning, we heard Luke set the time of his account "In the days of King Herod of Judea when a decree went out from Emperor Augustus." You heard that this story that Luke is about to unfold begins during the time that Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Luke is very particular about the date and setting of the Gospel.

John is very, very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. "In the beginning..." John begins his Gospel before time, before place, while chaos still reigned, and the abyss was void and without form—when no light, neither sun nor moon nor stars shone to illuminate the cosmos, the Word, Jesus, was with God and was God.

For John, it is neither here and now, nor there and then that the Gospel has its beginning. Before time, in immeasurable eternity, is where John starts his account. All things considered, it is the right place to begin an account of God becoming human. It only happens once. It had not happened before and we're told it will only happen again when time and eternity fuse at the end of the age. Then he will come in power and great triumph to judge the world.

Magnificent and mysterious: the Word was with God—he was in the beginning with God. The Word became flesh—incarnate—and lived among us, and now we raise our voices with joy and praise and thanksgiving because through the Word we have received grace upon grace.

Incarnation: The primary doctrine; the point from which all else begins for us. It is so simple and yet so complex. There is only one way to discuss it, and that's the way John begins it for us in his Gospel this morning: poetically, a hymn.

Great scholars have reflected deeply and broadly on the doctrine of incarnation. Shelf after shelf in the library is filled with fat thick books, slim skinny journals, tall and short, beautifully illustrated or just dense with text. It seem as though the more the theologians try to clarify what it all means, the more difficult it becomes to understand.

The Word is not an easy concept to figure out. It is only by using analogies to our own way of being and doing that we can begin to sort out an understanding of what God is up to. Right there we run into trouble since God, in scripture, has already told us that this isn't going to work: for my ways are not your ways nor my thoughts your thoughts. How else, though, are we to understand God and incarnation and all the other myriad doctrines that the church has cooked up over the centuries if we don't use what we know about ourselves and the word around us, to understand that which is beyond our comprehension.

The Logos, the word of God, the mind of God became flesh because God was determined for us to know him as best we could with the limited resources at our disposal. And so we select descriptions from a long list of metaphors: the Word is the breath of God, a stream emanating from God, the face of God turned toward creation. God sits on a throne and rules as king. God is nailed to the cross and dies in agony, scorned. God is jealous, angry, and prone to rage, vindictive, loving.

Xenophanes, five hundred years before the Word became flesh stated that "If horses and cattle did theology, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle." It's what we do because it is the only way we can begin our quest to understand the unfathomable.

Sunday after Sunday we're drawn here together for certain very important purposes. It all begins with a desire on our part to praise God, praise our creator for the magnificence of creation and give thanks for the blessings that we have received from God. All this we can put into quite ordinary terms. It takes little or no fancy theological palaver to offer thanks and give praise, and we can do it with song and prayer, story and sermon.

So here we are together to offer thanks and praise God, but we also come here with a hope of our own. It's not often put into the words of our prayers; there aren't many hymns that express this hope explicitly, but most of are here because we hope that in this place and in this time we will experience the presence of the holy, we will touch the cheek of eternity. We will know from the experience of being here together that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

For an hour or so, for all too short an amount of time, we will have been able through the presence of God's Holy Spirit—the Word—to delve into the depths of the divine. The Logos, who was with God before the beginning, is our point of contact with the divine.

"We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love you have made know to us in creation. For in these last days you sent the Word to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In him you have made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life."

Centuries ago, a Benedictine monk, Zeller, read this same passage from John's Gospel that we read this morning. He read the Gospel on a cold winter night when the community celebrated Christmas Mass. Now, the candles had been snuffed in the nave, the brothers had all returned to their cells. Zeller had heard the abbots learned sermon on the Doctrine of the Incarnation, he had sung the psalms and said the prayers with his brothers, and now, in the cold, cold winter darkness of the monastery, he had an epiphany and made a connection and his heart and soul exploded in prayer. In that moment he realized that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us to set us free:

"Lord, you have sent us joy! I leap...I skip...It is good to be alive. You give life. You give the spirit of gladness to feed it. I love you. My sins are forgiven. It is good to be alive...and you have made it so. Amen."

Thank God!

That is incarnation. God came among us because he loves us. God gives us life, and makes us worthy to stand before him.

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