

And the Word became Flesh

A few days ago, we celebrated one of the most joyous events in the entire Christian year: Christmas Day and the yearly remembrance of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. This morning, as we do every year on this First Sunday after Christmas, the church participates in the long-standing tradition of hearing the opening verses of the Gospel according to John.

John's gospel of Jesus is different from those written by the other three gospel writers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptics, which means to see with one eye. They are called that because they are so similar in the stories they tell about Jesus. John's Gospel is different. In John, for example, there is no account of Jesus' birth. There is no story of the annunciation to Mary; no story of the dreams that came to her husband Joseph. There is no mention of the shepherds and angels outside Bethlehem or baby Jesus in the manger. John does not write about the magi traveling from the east or the bright star overhead. If we had only the Gospel of John, we would have none of the scenes we sing about in our Christmas carols or acted out in our Christmas pageants.

John's gospel is different. It was the last gospel written, around the year 100 or so. It is likely that the community John was writing to already knew all those other stories I just mentioned. It is not that these stories are unimportant to John. His gospel is simply offering a different perspective on the story of Jesus.

These opening eighteen verses from John, chapter one are often called the Prologue of John's Gospel. This is John's description of what it means to have Christ come into the world. You could say it is John's description of what we are celebrating at Christmas. John attempts to express this encounter of Christ with the world in the most powerful language he can employ. He is trying to describe the wonder of Jesus' coming among us. So, he uses glorious prose on a grand scale, with the opening of his gospel hearkening back not just to Mary or Joseph, but all the way back to the beginning of the book of Genesis, back to start of all creation. He uses these words: In the beginning.

John tells us that the that the Word of God, present with God from the very beginning of creation, became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The Word took

on human form, and lived among us, full of grace and truth. Jesus is the Word of God, the Word made flesh. When we speak of God's love and truth and grace, we see that, fully, in our humanity, in Jesus. Jesus is the love of God incarnate – in human form.

This is the message and the miracle of the Christmas. In Jesus we see what it is to be fully human, and we are also shown the fullness of God's love.

Such a mystery cannot be fully described because we cannot fully understand it. But John has done as well as anyone ever has in putting this into words. That is why we have this tradition of always hearing this reading on this Sunday after Christmas. It helps us to hear again what Christmas is all about – this gift of Jesus, God in human form, God's gift of grace and love.

For me, the remarkable thing about John is that even though he is talking about something powerful and poetic, eternal and cosmic, he brings it down to something particular and tangible. That is because God brings it down to something very earthly and physical: And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. John, for all his high theology connects to real life. Flesh, as close as our own body.

After the people of Israel were set free from slavery in Egypt, God instructed Moses to build a dwelling place that would house the ark of the covenant, and it was used for generations afterwards. The English word for that dwelling place is tabernacle, or simply, tent. Israel would travel with this tent wherever they went in the wilderness, and when they reached the promised land. This tent included the place that only the priest would enter, an inner chamber called the Holy of Holies where the ark resided. Around this single large tent, surrounding that there was an entire courtyard set up to keep it separated from the rest of the community. Jews would describe this holy tent as the as the very dwelling place of God's presence. It came to be known as the shekinah, the dwelling, or presence of God. The place of God's glory.

John is telling us that what was once set apart from the people of God, separated by courtyard, and a structure of wood and fabric tents, in an inner chamber, has now been sent to be among us. The Word became flesh and lived among us; this word of God dwelt among us. The word for "dwelt" used here means Jesus tabernacled or pitched his tent among us. Just as the glory of God dwelt within the confines of that tent in ancient Israel, now, in the person of Jesus, that glory is here among us, as one

of us. The dividing walls which contained the shekinah, the glory of God, are no longer there.

The ancient tabernacle, and the temple building that followed, constructed a divide between the everyday and the holy, between where the community lived and where only the priests could go. It was saying, "This is sacred, and that is not." Sometimes we do the same things in our lives today. Sunday morning is the time for religion and church, while the rest of the week, say the middle of Thursday afternoon, for example, not so much. This lovely church building is the place to pray and know God's presence. But my kitchen at home, or my desk at work – I don't think so, I have other things to do there.

But God is the Lord of all creation, and of all our lives. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians that God sent Jesus into our hearts so we might cry out to God, "Abba, Father," just as Jesus did, because we are the children of God. We are God's children everywhere, and in every moment. That is the truth about God, and us. That is what Jesus came to show us.

Our lives are meant to know God and make God known. Because God is the Lord of all, that means we are to see God, and be the Body of Christ in our lives: sitting here in the pews of All Saints, and in our homes, and places of work, when we share meals and conversation with friends and family. God's glory does not only reside in a tent constructed in the time of Moses. In Christ, the glory of God has been revealed for all people. So, it is right that our church building be used for liturgies on Sunday, but also used for the support groups which meet here every single day of the week. And in all the meetings and concerts and other activities that take place here. Do you think God's presence is confined to the walls of this sanctuary between 8 and noon on Sundays and then again at 2:00 for the South Sudanese service? *All things* came into being through Christ. What has come into being in Christ was life, and the life was the light of *all* people, for all time. In the light of God, we are meant to see more clearly who God is, and who God created each of us to be.

The light of God, the presence of God, the glory of God dwells among us. That is what the whole story of Christmas is pointing toward: the baby born in the stable, the angels singing of the glory of God to the shepherds, the star leading people from far-off lands. The glory of the Lord is among us, revealed to us, dwelling with us, in our lives, in our flesh.

Spend some time this Christmas season in prayer and reflect on this wondrous Christmas gift that has been given to us. For the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of God's own son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. May the Word of God dwell within you. May you be the tabernacle, the dwelling place, where God's glory shines. Amen.

Trace Browning

First Sunday after Christmas- Year B

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 • Psalm 147 • Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7 • John 1:1-18

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

31 December 2023