

Christmas One - 12/27/09
St. David's

"And the logos became flesh and dwelt among us. Amen."

I guess this goes without saying, especially here at St. David's. But let me verify for all of you what you already know. People in my profession are weird. Our thought process is weird, our actions are weird and our worldview is so far askew from the rest of the population, that everyone knows we are weird.

I understand that is a strange statement to begin with on the first Sunday of Christmas. But because I am one of those weird people, this was one of my first thoughts as I reached down deep to write this fourth sermon of the week. I will also admit that in addition to being weird, I had also reached the punchy stage, desperately trying to come up with a fourth way to tell you the Christmas story in a novel way that would also speak to you in your present life and situation.

I thought about this weirdness partly because I was delusional. But at least the weird thought was triggered by today's Gospel. As soon as I started contemplating it, I could not help but think of a priest acquaintance of mine who had come up with the theory that she could identify someone's Myers-Briggs personality score by asking them a few theological questions. The key question in her study was to ask them which was their favorite Gospel. So she asked everyone in her seminary class that question, whereupon the theory immediately fell apart. That's because virtually everyone she asked said the same thing. Their favorite was today's Gospel, The Gospel of John. So much for Gospels by personality.

This same priest also had this bizarre habit of buying every new Biblical translation as soon as it hit the streets. As soon as she got it, she would then immediately turn to today's Gospel and read it first. If the prologue to the Gospel of John was poetic and beautiful, she would without further investigation, deem the new translation a success. If it sounded stilted or lacked fluidity, she would toss the Bible out as useless.

Despite the weirdness of my priest friend, her unusual habit does suggest two very significant points. First, today's Gospel may be the most lyrical prose in the entire Bible. Some, in fact, consider it the most poetic piece of literature of any kind ever written. Second, the prologue to the Gospel of John is as meaningful as anything in our sacred text. For many people, those words you just heard are the most important words ever written.

The strange thing is, while many view the prologue as the most consequential prose ever written, this is not the version of the Christmas story that immediately pops into any of our heads, is it? I've yet to see, for example, a single Christmas pageant based on today's Gospel. No one makes Christmas ornaments with it, no one paints pictures of it, and no one has plastic lawn decorations depicting it. It is an entirely different view of Christmas than we see or hear or read anywhere at this time of year.

But then, all of our views of Christmas are completely different. The Gospel of Mark skips over Christmas entirely, starting with Jesus's baptism as the beginning. The Gospel of Luke, the story we just heard on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, the one that we use the most, has the arduous trip to Bethlehem, the manger, the shepherds,

and the angels we have heard on high. The story in the Gospel of Matthew gives us none of those things. It tells the ominous tale of a birth that leads to the family not traveling to Bethlehem, but leaving it immediately and going to Egypt, to escape King Herod's pronouncement that all male babies will be killed. It also tells us the part of the story we will commemorate next week, the visit to the baby not from shepherds, but from wise men, Gentiles from another country. It also tells us about the star that leads those Gentiles to Jesus, who is not in a manger, but presumably a home. And now today, the Gospel of John takes us beyond the placement of Jesus in history, to the Cosmic Christ, to a deep theology that suggests that the person who became a human and historically dwelt on earth, is none other than the one who was with God at the beginning of creation.

Why do we have three totally different stories of Christmas, stories that seem disconnected from one another? For the same reason that we have four gospels. Each story was written in a different time and place to different people to answer very different questions. Lucky for us, we have them all. Without these very divergent stories, we would be left with a one-dimensional understanding of Jesus and Christ. But with them, we get to see Jesus and Christ within the framework of both religious and secular history as well as from the universal perspective that John gives us today. It is a rich tapestry, so rich that it continues to speak to us and change us today like no other story we have ever heard. Let us put those pieces together so that we may be changed once again.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth that we heard last week leads to the birth in a manger with shepherds and an angel. It tells us much about who the baby that was born

will become. We learn of Jesus's concern first of all for women, and the huge role women will play in his life and ministry. Women will be a focal point in the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus turns the patriarchal society of his day on its ear. Luke's Christmas story is a forerunner of the way Jesus will change the role of women in society. Second, the visit from the shepherds and Mary's Magnificat are precursors of Jesus's mission to the marginalized and his desire that we continue that mission. Finally, the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke points out the critical role of the Holy Spirit with Mary, and at Jesus's birth as the most important factor in their lives now and to come, just as it is in our lives.

The story of the visit of wise Gentiles to Jesus and the family's flight to Egypt in the Gospel of Matthew, tell us something very different about Emmanuel, God with us. This narrative has echoes of another story in the Hebrew Bible with good reason. Matthew wants us to see the parallels between Moses and Jesus. He wants us to see that Jesus is the new Moses, the one who has come to liberate us from our oppression. In addition, his message is not heard just by the Jews, but also Gentiles. Gentiles are welcome to not just visit Jesus, but be a part of his vision to all of the world.

Years after these two visions of Christmas are recorded, John gets to describe what they together mean to a new generation. He is able to see beyond the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. He is able to move beyond what Jesus did in one society to see his effect from the perspective of creation history. He sees the cosmic view of Christ, the one who was there from the very beginning.

Those of us not versed in John's culture, may miss the depth of what he is telling

us about the Cosmic Christ. The difficulty comes in the translation of “Logos” in Greek, what we have rendered as “The Word.” The idea of Logos was conceived in 500 BCE by Heraclitus. He described Logos as “the universal reason governing and permeating the world.” In the Hebrew Bible when we hear the phrase “The Word of the Lord”, this is what the author is describing. It does not just mean God communicating with humans, but rather the creative power of God. The idea of the Logos was of an independent force of reason that was present in the world. So when John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” what he is saying is that Jesus, the human being, is this very Logos, the very essence of creativity and reason in the universe.

Nothing seems to separate Christians more from our Jewish sisters and brothers than Christmas, the idea that it was this event where God suddenly became part of creation and with us. The suggestion in fact is made by some Christians that the God of the Hebrew Bible is a distant God, separated from us totally and completely. They then describe Christmas as the act that changed all that, that in and through incarnation, God for the first time became immanent with humanity.

Today’s Gospel seems to verify that. But this morning, I would suggest to you that John’s description of Christmas that you just heard, is not something new at all. This wonderful piece of beautiful prose, is not a foreign concept to the Jews that preceded him. In fact, the concept of the Logos is not only a part of Greek culture but it is also described often in the Hebrew Bible. Listen to Proverbs 8 and tell me if it reminds you of anything. *“God created me at the beginning of God’s work, the first of God’s acts*

of old...At the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth...before the mountains had been shaped...When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep...when God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside God, like God's master workman; and I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the children of humans."

Who is that speaking in Proverbs 8? It is Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom. If the author of the Gospel of John did not write today's Christmas story with Proverbs 8 in mind, I would be totally shocked. It seems patently obvious that what John is saying is that the historical person Jesus is the same person that Proverbs 8 describes as being there in the beginning, that Christ is Sophia, that Christ is Divine Wisdom.

It is a gigantic theological leap from the Jesus of Matthew and Luke to the one we hear described today. But this is the Christ that John's community experienced. They believe that Jesus was and Christ is universal Wisdom, the same wisdom their ancestors described so many years ago.

Without the Christmas stories in Luke and Matthew, linking Jesus to Moses and seeing Jesus as the one who will protect the marginalized and lift up women to their proper place, John's community could never have experienced Christ as described in today's Gospel. It is the same for all of us. If we are going to experience the real power of Christmas and the power of Christ in our lives, we need to put together the Jesus recounted in all three of our Gospels. That is how we experience the ultimate Christ in our lives, one who goes even beyond the Cosmic figure described today.

Finally, when we discover this Christ in our own lives, when we understand why Christmas is so important to us, let us also realize that this Christ does not separate us from those who do not celebrate Christmas. It links us together. Today's Gospel makes this abundantly clear. The God that we celebrate this season is the God who was there at the beginning. This God is the same personified Wisdom referred to in the Hebrew Bible, the same experience of Divinity found in all of the world's wisdom traditions.

Let us then celebrate the particularity of each of our Christmas stories, the stories that encapsulate the essence of our faith. Christmas must always be for us the story of a God who became one of us and remains with us in as intimate a way as possible. But let us also remember the universal message of all three of our Christmas stories, of a Jesus and a Christ who reaches out not just to Christians, but to everyone, including the Gentiles, including all those who have been oppressed and to an entire universe seeking Wisdom and Logos. Let us celebrate our intimate connection with that God and then secure ourselves to each other, bringing God's wisdom and love to all so that we may create the universe that Christmas suggests is possible. Merry Christmas to all of you. Amen.