

CHRISTMAS I December 29, 2019 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The prologue to John's gospel is always the text for the Sunday after Christmas Day. So, it follows upon the nativity accounts of Luke and Matthew which dominate the Advent readings and those of Christmas proper. And there is a good reason for this. The prologue is *John's nativity account*. It is very different from those of Luke and Matthew, but then the 4th gospel differs from the others in nearly every way. We have no nativity account in Mark, and Paul never mentions the birth of Christ. So, we have just these three birth narratives, all different and all critical to our understanding of the meaning of Christmas. If we relied exclusively on John, we would have a Nativity story without *angels heard on high*, a *babe lying in a manger*, or *three wise men* coming from afar to worship the Christ child.

But despite these omissions, the prologue is an exceptionally beautiful and profound statement about the Incarnation. John doesn't give us an historical account of the birth of Jesus. What he provides is much more a kind of confession of faith about the Incarnation. The author seems more interested in having a proper belief in Jesus now, *not* the specifics about *how he came to us*. And for John, this is not so much the story of Jesus as it is the story of God working out his purposes in history. His portrait of God and Jesus "offers a grand cosmic vision of the unfolding of history," so much so that we continue to view our faith in terms of its development over time, elements of both Judaism and Christianity which are not common to the other world religions.

In addition to the cosmic perspective, however, his view of Jesus also tells us that it was God's intention to "become like the stuff of *this world*, and live in specific moments in our world, in our communities, in our lives." In this way, it is God's intent that this story "gets lived out in recognizable ways in the world...not only over some grand cosmic saga, but also in the way we engage the specific broken places in our communities...and our interactions with our neighbors."

Thus, this is not only the story of the origins of *the Word* but of that Word made flesh. And therein we find the great mystery of the Incarnation. John's account gives us a threefold claim: that "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," which reveals the origin of Jesus, his relationship to God, and his identity *as* God. In Greek, *Logos* means "to make something fully known by careful explanation or by clear revelation." Thus Jesus as the Word is "the clear revelation of the Father."

As the revealer of God, "he communicates to us the thoughts, feelings and desires of God." If we want to know God and understand his will, we look to Jesus as the fullest explanation of the Father. The meaning of the Logos has changed over time. Originally, it was a verb meaning "to gather" Later, it came to refer to human reason. By the time of Jesus, however, Logos had come to mean "the creative power of God and the kingship of God over all things" which are similar ways of suggesting the idea of revelation.

It is interesting to speculate about *when* it was that Jesus *became* the Son of God. Paul, who is the earliest writer about Jesus, doesn't seem to regard the question as being of much interest. Yet, when pressed, he seems to have believed that this did not occur until the resurrection itself.

Mark who wrote about 20 years after Paul, seemed to believe that Jesus became the Son of God at his baptism, whereas Luke and Matthew, as we have just rediscovered over the past few weeks, mark his birth as the origin of his special relationship with the Father.

By contrast with his treatment of the term *Logos*, when John uses the word *Kosmos*, he is describing *the world which has turned away from God*. That world was created by God, so this turning away is akin to rejecting or not knowing or appreciating who one's *parents* are. Just think for a moment about what this would mean for a child --- it means feeling incomplete, disoriented, not at home in the world he occupies.

“Yet, *it is this world that God loves* and to which the Son (or the Light) is sent.” The cosmos did not participate in its own creation. “It is something that happened to the Word....grace and truth did not participate in their appearance on earth. It happened to them.”

This is the most basic thing that we all need to recognize and accept: God created everything and without Him was not anything made that was made, in the familiar words of the Creed. So, perhaps the failure to acknowledge this basic truth is the essence of sin itself --- turning our backs on the Creator. After all, the best our science has to offer “mostly *describes* parts of creation: *description of process* does not of itself define *meaning and purpose*,” whereas for the gospel writers, that search for meaning and purpose is the primary motivator behind the act of creating the magical narratives they have bequeathed to us.

It may be, as some have suggested, that this prologue is really an early hymn of the church, something akin to the *Magnificat*, for example, or the *Song of Simeon* which we encounter in our morning and evening prayer liturgies.

And this is actually quite believable, because hymns or musical accounts are better than prose at helping us understand complex ideas. And they leave a lasting impression. John's first chapter resembles other passages we recognize as hymns in Philippians and Colossians, for example. All of them stress the pre-existence of Christ (from before Creation itself) and his mysterious role in that process. And the most mystifying thing of all is that this partner in Creation actually came to live among us, share our human nature, and relate to us in the closest imaginable way.

The pre-existing Son, then, came to us in flesh and blood. Or as the hymn in Philippians puts it, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, he was revealed in human shape." The poetry is so moving that we are simply swept up in it which is perhaps the only way we're able to comprehend something as mysterious as the Incarnation. Another common theme in these early hymns of the church is the idea that our "almighty, all-powerful God, who created everything that exists and is beyond our comprehension" ---- this same God came to earth as a gift to humanity, the most tangible revelation possible of God's love for his creatures. Grasping that idea has been both the essential core and the great challenge of the story of Christmas. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

(Sources: Brian Stoffregen, "John I. (1-9) 10-18, 2 Sunday after Christmas - Year ABC," www.crossmarks.com; Donald Heinz, "Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations," *Center for Christian Ethics*, Baylor University; John Allen, "The Politics of Incarnation - John 1: 1-18," Political Theology Network, 2019; Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on John 1: (1-9,)10-18," www.workingpreacher.org; Karen Wiseman, "Commentary on John 1: (1-9), 10-18," www.workingpreacher.org ; Andrew Prior, "To See the Face of God," www.onemansweb.org; John Petty, "Lectionary Blogging: John 1: 1-18," www.progressiveinvolvement.com)