

A Sermon for Christmas I

December 29, 2013 – John 1:1-18

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At some point in life, whether it was writing a report in the fourth grade, or a paper in college, a business summary or a press release – yes, even a sermon – we learned that the beginning is of utmost importance. Setting your course at the outset is the only way to transport your readers – or your listeners – to the place you wish them to go. It is all about the words.

The opening verses of today's gospel message are a powerful, powerful example of what every teacher, professor, boss, or inner voice was trying to tell us.

"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. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... 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."

Today's is a gospel passage that should be narrated by James Earl Jones, accompanied by a full orchestra with lots of rolling tympani and soulful French horns. These are words of creation, and incarnation, and revelation – of glory, and grace, and truth. It is in this prolog – this beautiful poetry – that the author of the Gospel of John introduces us to the Incarnate Jesus.

The Nativity story in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke dwell on Jesus' humanity – something of which we need constant reminding, lest we decide that heeding Jesus' words and answering Jesus' call in *our* lives is impossible. (After all, he *is* God...and "we don't even come close" is our excuse.) John gives us a very different look at the Nativity. John's Christmas would be difficult to do in a children's program. There is no baby lying in a manger. There are no angels or shepherds. There is no star. No magi. John doesn't give us much of a historical account of Christmas...instead he gives us a confession of faith about the incarnation of God. John is not concerned about what, exactly, happened in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus, but tells us, instead, that the story of Jesus is not ultimately a story about Jesus; it is, in fact, the story *of* God.* And in the words of John – the poetry – the hymnody we hear the refrain of God's love song to the world.

The Gospel of John begins at the beginning, with the divinity of Jesus the Word (with a capital W) – Jesus who was there with God, who *is* God, through all of creation and before. The Gospel of John tackles the sacred mystery in a way that points out what a mystery it is. Not a little mystery with some clues that can lead to a resolution. Not a mystery like 'where did I leave my car keys' or 'who will Miss

Marple deduce has poisoned the postmistress?' Not even a big mystery, like 'what is a black hole?' (which, by the way, will forever remain a mystery to me!).

No, the opening of John's Gospel speaks, in the best words a human author is capable of expressing, of the Greatest Mystery: Who is God? Who is God's son? And who the Son of God/Son of Man is, and was, and forever will be. The Word, through whom all things came into being and without whom not one thing would exist. The Word – not a written word – not even the words we call the Bible – no, the Word as Jesus, God revealed! God was made flesh and made known to us, and lived among us. Not in our historical time, and not in our geographical place...much to our frequent frustration, because doesn't it seem as though this Mystery (with a capital M) would be easier to understand – easier to follow – easier to believe – if only it happened in our own time, in our own lives?

We are called in many ways to remember we are, *indeed*, part of the indwelling of God made flesh...That the Incarnation, just like the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, was once – for *always*. Sometimes that calling comes through words such as those we heard in the Gospel this morning. The Word was made flesh and made his home among us! Jesus did not pop in and pop out...appear, only to disappear. He pitched his tent among the people and lived in relationship with them. He ate with them, and traveled with them, and carried on conversations with them. He was there at their creation – there at ours – and then he came to live in intimate relationship with them – as he does with us, through the Spirit.

Why, then, isn't the world a perfect place? Why is there disease and starvation, war and poverty? The brokenness seems to surround us. We rejoiced a short time ago at the birth of the new nation of South Sudan, and prayed that an end to the strife would bring a better life for our companions in Glory Parish and Renk Diocese. Yet violence has boiled up again, and this past week the brother of our friend Bishop Joseph was shot and seriously wounded. Currently there are 17 million children living in food insecure households in the United States – households without the economic capability of providing minimum sufficient nutrition. 17 million. How many do you think there are in our own community...our own neighborhood? How many homeless people will die of the brutal cold on the streets of Chicago tonight? How many have no shelter on the streets of Galena? Reiterating the headlines isn't the only evidence of brokenness. We live in a society that seems to thrive on opposition – the war of words and opinions. We live in families too often tattered with discord, suffering the aching disease of heartbreak. We live as people who, far too often, feel completely alone. Why do we choose not to hear God's love song?

The passage from John tells of this very condition – albeit in another time and context – when it says, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” John was speaking particularly about a time when Jews who were followers of Christ were suffering deep schism from Jews who did not. Imagine how the author of the gospel would find those of us who sincerely call ourselves Christians, yet who still too often refuse to accept the Word made flesh. Perhaps that author would remind us what has already been set down....what we heard this morning...what we need to hear again and again. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

The Gospel of John sings to us of the Great Paradox – Jesus as God: eternal, incomprehensible, creator of all that is from before time – and Jesus incarnate: dwelling among us, giver of grace upon grace. Isn't that beautiful? Grace upon grace.

We, too, live in paradox. When you stand outside and look heavenward– late on a clear, clear night – there is at first the sense of being very small and insignificant in the vastness of the cosmos. And then there comes the exhilarating feeling of being a part – no matter how small – of something so grand and magnificent. We sing *Away in a Manger*, hushed and reverent, because we marvel at the birth of the Child, and we sing *Joy to the World*, exuberant and filled with the knowledge of the promise fulfilled. We falter and fail and chip away at our already broken world, and then again and again we stand up and step out in the knowledge that our darkness will never overcome God's light...that it is the promised Light of the World who illuminates our path and carries us out of our darkness.

The Word Incarnate – God revealed! – is before all time, and through all time, beyond all time. Our words can only begin and end. And so, in ending, I borrow from Steven Charleston. *The Mystery has come...the promise has been kept...the beginning of all that we hope has entered the world...the birth of simple love has happened...been made permanent, been made common, alive in each of us, available to all of us, a moment when what was always taken for granted can never be the same...the thread of time has turned toward grace, lifting the human story to its peace-filled future, giving us life. The mystery has come!*

* Rev. Craig Satterlee