

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

So far it appears that we have survived Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and we have arrived on the First Sunday after Christmas, more or less. Over Advent, we heard the stories and prophecies of the coming of the Lord, and on Christmas Eve and Day, we heard the story of the Nativity of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It would therefore be logical to assume that we might now hear one of the stories of Jesus' childhood on the Sunday following Christmas such as his dedication at the Temple, the visitation of the Magi, the flight to Egypt by the Holy Family, the slaughter of the innocents by King Herod, or his wandering and being found in the Temple of Jerusalem by his parents, Mary and Joseph. And those stories do indeed come up on such feasts like Holy Name Day on January 1, the Epiphany on January 6, and Candlemas on February 2. Also, the lectionaries in the Church of England and Anglican Church of Canada's respective Books of Common Prayer have stories like this for the First Sunday after Christmas. However, the architects of our own lectionary have placed this seemingly unusual passage from the Gospel of S. John as the Gospel reading for the Sunday after Christmas.

These first few verses of the first chapter of the Gospel of S. John are filled with metaphors, poetry, allegories, and symbolism, and contains rich philosophy and theology throughout its words. Even if one does not understand the message present within this text, one cannot help but appreciate its beautiful poetry and wordplay present in this passage. It speaks of the incarnation of the Word, the Son of God taking flesh; it contains the whole of the Divine Plan for creation and redemption. Much has been written about it over the course of two millennia. It's potency was so significant, that in the eleventh century, at the end of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Western Church, the priest would read this passage in what was called "The Last Gospel," as a reminder of the incarnation, first as a private devotion on the way back to the sacristy, and then audibly for the whole congregation to hear. This practice however overtime came to an end. Thomas Cranmer did not include The Last Gospel in the first Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England in 1549. It was also removed from the Roman Catholic Mass as one of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. For us Anglicans and for our Roman Catholics brothers and sisters, I believe the decision to remove The Last Gospel was a mistake because it diminishes the significance of the Incarnation in the history of our redemption.

When we juxtapose this passage from the Gospel of John with our Christmas nativity scene, it seemingly does not make sense: how can such a humble scene coincide with this abstract scene from John's Gospel. Whereas the nativity scene can be easily made into Christmas decorations, this cannot. Yet both realities are true, and two sides of the same coin. And though we might consciously say, "yeah we hear this all, Son of God, divine and human, we say it in the Creed every week," I find that we shy away from what John has to say in favor of the amalgamated accounts from the Gospels of Ss. Luke and Matthew. We can conceptualize that scene better, we can package that scene better, we can present that scene better, we can market that scene better, and we can control that scene better because that scene has a baby in it--a precious child that we can put precious ornamentation and pageantry around whilst ignoring the bigger picture.

This is not to say this is a bad scene or that it is bad to have pageants and such, these pageants are important to highlight and to teach people of the humility to be found in the birth of Christ, but we cannot isolate this event from the deep, cosmic reality of the incarnation. John's scene is weird, it is difficult to explain, and it takes the power to control the narrative away from us and places it in God's hands. For 21st century Americans, that is terrifying, because we are accustomed to defining things on our own terms and placing ourselves or what we want at the center of the story rather than what is there. Yet we must dive into this deep place to understand the mysteries of the incarnation. Listen to Christmas carols that are still playing on the radio, and read the carols in our hymnal, and you will see God's majesty in the midst of such humility. In this, we find in John's account of the Nativity more understanding about what this Christmas season is than anything else we can imagine.

When we listen to the Greek of this passage, we hear the beauty of this mystery:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word—before time, if you can conceptualize that; before space, if you can conceptualize that, before creation itself, there was the Logos, the Word. Greek philosophers often would use Logos, or Word, as an abstract term for a principle source of knowledge, or the principle source of knowledge; often contrasted with Sophia as a particular or the principle source of wisdom. Christians however took to the term Logos not as an abstract term, but personified it as the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God. From here, the author of the Gospel of John borrows from the Greek version of the Book of Genesis to shed light on the relationship between God the Father and the Word:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.

In the Beginning, God made the Heavens and the Earth. Ἐν ἀρχῇ, “In the Beginning” John brings us back to this primordial place and time. When God makes the Heavens and the Earth, God speaks. God is not alone in this creation, the Logos, the Word is present with God the Father, and is God himself as God the Son. What comes forth from God the Father's spoken Word or Logos is all that is and ever will be. At the end of that creation, God, through his Spoken Word and with the Power of the Holy Spirit forms humanity in his image and likeness, and we too are gifted with words.

Words have power, the power to create, shape, mold, form, reform, and destroy. We see that power in the midst of creation as God creates with and through the Word. As we too are made in the image and likeness of God, so too do our words contain creative and destructive power. That power is greater than anything else that we can wield, because words manifest into thought, which manifest into action. We see how a kind and joyful word can transform a space around us, and we see how a word can destroy others and ourselves. The first sins of humanity were done through words—through lying and deception, and through our words the creation was marred.

This is why we have the Christmas Season, and this is why we celebrate such a humble birth, because God the Son, the Divine Word of God, present at Creation, empties himself of all power and magnificence save his love, for it is in love that all of this occurs, and enshrouds his divine nature in flesh. His Divine Nature never overtakes his human nature, and his human nature never corrupts his Divine Nature. The Divine Splendors of the Heavenly realm manifest themselves in simple images—a stable or a cave as a royal palace, a manger as a king’s bed, a mother’s lap as a throne, animals and shepherds as a royal court—here, paradise is on Earth, God is among his people, and the creation made by a word, distorted by a word, is now restored by the Word.

Jesus Christ, by sharing in our human nature, allows for us to share in his Divine Nature. S. John Chrysostom, a fourth century bishop of Constantinople wrote on the Nativity:

“For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit that He may save me.”

By taking on flesh, Jesus becomes a bridge for us to walk upon to restore us into the fullness of the image and likeness of God. We walk that bridge by being in relationship with him: through Baptism and the Eucharist we share in his Life, Death, and Resurrection, becoming a part of his Divine and Human Body. We become more like him through acts of charity and justice. A kind word to someone in pain, visiting someone in the hospital or in prison, and even giving some money to the person begging on the street when possible. Anyone can do these small actions, but we find that sometimes in the smallness, in the person-to-person interactions, we find Christ, inviting us into the heavenly realm. In these exchanges, Heaven is on Earth. We do not need to wait for the bureaucrats in Honolulu or Washington to make grand sweeping gestures to make Heaven manifest on Earth. We cannot let God’s mission of justice and evangelism fall on the shoulders of the leadership of the Episcopal Church alone. We might have a great presiding bishop, and we might have a great rector here, but evangelism does not fall on them alone—that is our job. Our own actions, as small as they may seem, is where that heavenly and cosmic realm manifest around us.

This is why the Nativity from the Gospel of John is so important, and why we need it in our lives and in our Christmas story. The Christmas story is a lynchpin of history. It is one of those moments where nothing changes, and yet everything changes. A Divine Mystery is enshrouded by humble events, and yet those humble events behold a Beauty far surpassing human understanding. The beginning, the middle, and the end are linked; God is present in and amongst us in our beginning, in the middle, and the end. And now, because humanity and Divinity are linked in the person of Jesus Christ, we too are at the beginning, the middle, and the end of creation. We now participate in a new creation through being as Christ to others. This story reminds us of the very paradox of what Emmanuel means—God is with us, he will now always be with us, now and until the very end of time itself.

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be glory given!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!
O Come let us adore him
Venite Adoremus
O Come let us adore him
Christ the Lord.

Amen.