

Christmas 1, Yr. B

December 31, 2017

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; John 1:1-14

The sermon theme on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day was about Christ reconciling the world to God, holding all things together, including those things that are seemingly opposite, like divinity and humanity. The Christmas scripture was Luke's description of the Incarnation and today we heard John's. They aren't exactly opposites, but they certainly are coming from different starting points. Someone once remarked that John's is rather less Christmassy. Indeed – I think that's quite the understatement! John is not telling a story; instead he's giving us the context of the story and telling us the meaning of the story. As hearers, we need to hold both accounts together to get the full picture because, while Luke emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, John is coming from the opposite direction, emphasizing the divinity of Christ. If we only heard Luke, with the stable, the manger, the shepherds, the star, the angels, it might be easy to slip into a kind of soft sentimentality. But John provides a necessary corrective – his vision is awesome and cosmic and challenging. It's been pointed out that In John's Gospel we see the bridge being built from the theology of the earlier gospels to the theology of the 2nd century which named Christ as the 2nd person of the Trinity.

I remember reading about a priest who said that she was tired of the cozy me-and-Jesus theology that resulted in T-shirts with the crucifixion on the front or coffee cups with Jesus' face on them. She felt that there was a shortage of reverence these days and thought perhaps we needed a bit more awe. Well, here it is. In this prologue to his Gospel, which sets out all the major themes that he will address – themes of new creation, light, love and truth – one gets the feeling that what John is trying to say is simply too big for human language.

"In the beginning was the Word," he says. No human being being born in a stable, but the pre-existent Christ, with God from all eternity, without beginning or end. And here in his language about who Christ really was, John is also holding things together. In that word, WORD, which is *dabar* in Hebrew and Logos in Greek, John is using language that bridges a gap in understanding, language that is understandable in both cultures. You may remember that the Hebrew word, *dabar*, encapsulates the power of language. The Hebrews thought of the spoken word as a dynamic reality, especially when it came to God. Think back to Genesis, which John is mirroring here by starting with the same language that Genesis used: IN THE BEGINNING. And in Genesis, creation is all about the power of God's word. God said, "Let there be LIGHT," and there was light. So a Jew reading John would have thought of Jesus Christ, the Word, as the vehicle by which God's self-expression came into being. They would also have understood that, in Jesus, God was saying, this is WHO I AM. So, while Moses asked to SEE the face of God, Jesus actually WAS the face, the very being of God.

The same word for the Greeks was LOGOS, but it carried a slightly different meaning. It included the ideas of mind and rationality; they saw it as the creating, guiding power of the universe, what made it all and what kept it all going. So what John was saying to his Greek readers was, "For centuries, you've been thinking and writing about the Logos, the power that made the world, the power by which we humans reason and understand, the power by which

we can come into contact with God. Well, Jesus Christ is that Logos. In Jesus, that creating, illuminating, sustaining mind of God has come to earth.

But, in the end, both Luke and John point to an incredibly astonishing pronouncement – perhaps the most significant claim of our Christian faith, that the word became flesh and lived among us.

Someone has said that, this time of the year, we often hear the phrase, “And how was your Christmas?” And, indeed, once the company has gone home and the tree is out on the street, it’s easy to think of Christmas as being over. But if we take a page from John’s book, we’ll be able to see that Christmas, new creation, the coming of Christ into the world, is on-going. The light is always coming into the world and the darkness will never overwhelm it.

And that leads to a couple more insights that I hope we can take away this morning. Both Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, and John write about us being children of God. For John, that means that we come to live as Christ lived, in light and grace and truth. It’s been said that when people looked at Christ they saw God. Like his father, there was no discrepancy between what he thought, what he said and how he lived. That, I think, is the kind of person each of us is called to become. We’re called to that same kind of life of authenticity, called to labor until we’re “born” into the person we were created to be. LIGHT in the sense of understanding plays a big part in that transformation. You may remember the story of the family who went to the Carlsbad Caverns as part of their vacation. When they were well below the earth, the lights suddenly went out. The younger child, frightened, began to cry, but her older brother comforted her by saying, “Don’t worry, there’s someone here who knows how to turn on the lights.” There it is – by his coming among us, by his life as one of us, Christ turned on the light. And in that light we can see who God is and who we are and where we’re supposed to be going with our lives. One of the things we see is that God has, amazingly enough, loved humanity from the beginning. He never gives up; He keeps trying to make us his sons and daughters, bound to him in mutual love. You can trace salvation history through this notion that God keeps trying: first humans were in Paradise, but it wasn’t enough because we wanted to be gods ourselves. And then God tried establishing a covenant: I’ll be your God and you will be my people, but that didn’t work either. And then God tried the 10 commandments as a guide to the kind of life that would allow loving relationships with God and with one another; he even put them on tablets of stone so we wouldn’t misplace them, but that didn’t work all that well either. Then God tried saying, OK, OK, how about just two commandments: love me and love your neighbor. Same dismal results. So finally, God said, how about if I send my son, the expression of my very being, and you’ll have a concrete example to follow. And, through his spirit, I’ll be present with you always.

That understanding is the light that we’ve been given to walk in. That God, in Christ, is present in all creation, present in me, in you, in those we love and those we fear, in friends and enemies. There’s a story written by a Christian who was visiting family in India. He said that he had been meditating in his room one morning and when he came out, his two small nieces were waiting on either side of the door. He had on a red cap and they pulled it down over his eyes and led him into their room, asking him to sit down. And then they said, “Would you like to see the Lord?” “Very much,” he replied. “Then open your eyes,” they said. He did and he said that he found himself looking into a mirror all beautifully decorated with fruits and flowers. The face

he saw was, of course, his own. He said that doing this was a tradition in his family in which all members are reminded that, when they look into a mirror, the face they see there is the Lord's. And then he went on to say that, should someone later have an outburst of anger, that person is gently reminded that not too long ago, he or she saw the Lord in the mirror and it is time to act upon that love, kindness and compassion that resides in us all.

And finally, with John, who sees creation and salvation as on-going, timeless happenings, what if we thought of Christmas not as a once-a-year event, not as a noun, but rather as a verb? Then, perhaps, instead of asking each other, "How was your Christmas?" we could ask instead, "How are you Christmassing? Because, after all, Christmas is not just a day to be celebrated, but it's a life to be lived, a way of being in the world. A final story -it's the one about the little girl who was in the Christmas play as a star and, when her mother asked her what she was supposed to say or do, she smiled and said, "Oh I don't have to any of that! I just stand there and shine." A good image for us as sons and daughters of God, gifted with his truth and his light and his love. How amazingly awesome is that? Amen.