

Christmas 1, Yr. C, 2018
December 30, 2018
John 1:1-18

As you know, all four of the Gospels have a different starting point. Mark begins with Jesus' baptism and active ministry; Luke and Matthew begin with his birth. But John goes all the way back before the creation of the world and begins with what's called the "pre-existence" of Christ. IN THE BEGINNING, he says, echoing the words from Genesis.

Why the difference? Partly, of course, because each of them was writing to a different community, trying to answer different questions and concerns, and each had a different theological stance. But also, timing was crucial. John was the last Gospel written, probably around the year 100 and no doubt, by then, there had been much more thought about the significance of Jesus as people wrestled with the question we hear so often in the Gospels: WHO is this person – the one who heals and forgives sins and commands nature.

At Christmas we hear the extremes of the church's response. On the one hand, we hear Luke who tells the story with all the particularity of what it means to be human – the human person is limited in time and space, born into this time, not that; in this place, not that, of this ethnicity, not that, this gender,

not that. But then, over and against that, we hear John's great Gospel. John is about universality; his is a cosmic view, that view NOT limited by time and space. It's so hard for us to get our heads around this. Have you every tried to talk to a child about the idea of the beginning, about God being there before there was anything? Or, for that matter, tried to imagine it yourself?

Sometime ago, I read something by a scientist, Brian Greene, (*The Elegant Universe*) in which he talks about black holes, among other things, but also about what would happen without the constraints of time and space:

“An intelligence that, at a given instant, could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings that make it up, if moreover it were vast enough to submit these data to analysis, would encompass in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atoms. For such an intelligence nothing would be uncertain, and the future, like the past, would be open to its eyes.”

He uses the words, “an intelligence” but he's talking about God, with the same view as John.

And then, while John uses the language “all things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being,” another modern scientist asks his readers to think of cupping your

hands and then emptying all the air, all the molecules, all the particles, all the photons from what you are “holding.” He points out that we would call that a vacuum, or emptiness, or pure space. But the news, he says, this modern John, is that “careful investigation of this vacuum reveals the strange appearance of elementary particles in this emptiness. Even where there are no atoms, and no elementary particles, and no protons, and no photons, suddenly elementary particles will emerge. The particles, he says, simply “foam into existence.” He realizes how “unreasonable” this sounds but says that he is asking us to contemplate a universe where somehow, being itself arises out of a field of what he calls “fecund emptiness.” (*The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* by Brian Swimme) Theologians would call this creation from nothing.

One way to look at the theology of Christmas is to think of it all in terms of reconciliation, of things seemingly opposite being held together. As the Christmas blessing says, this is the night in which earth and heaven came together. The Christmas scriptures hold Jesus’ humanity and his divinity together. The two scientific quotes hold science and religion together.

One way of looking at John’s Gospel is that it holds things together, too. The most obvious way, perhaps, is in his use of the word WORD which for

the Greeks meant LOGOS. By using that word, John was able to phrase the Christian truth in a way that made it accessible beyond the Jewish community. As you probably remember, the Hebrews thought of the spoken word as a dynamic reality, especially when it came to God – God said Let there be and it happened. They saw the spoken word as alive, as a unit of energy charged with power. So, a Jew reading John's Gospel 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 being of God.

The same word for the Greeks was LOGOS, but it carried a slightly different meaning. It included the idea 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 come down to earth. In Jesus, that creating, illuminating, controlling, sustaining mind of God has come to earth.

John holds together the creation ideas of the Old and what would become the New Testaments, too. He reiterates Genesis, “In the beginning...” he says, but he’s telling the story in a new way, because the Messiah having come changes everything. Yes, there was a creation, but it was in and through Christ. Yes, there was a light that shattered the darkness and contained the chaos but now you must see the light as Christ who has come into the world and has conquered all the darkness of despair and death to which humans have been held in bondage. Yes, humans were created but they are created not of “blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. It’s all so much more than we thought, all so much more than we had hoped for, says John.

One final thought about reconciliation. Have you ever thought back to some decision you made and wished you had the chance to make it over again – you certainly wouldn’t make the same decision again! One author I read wondered if God, after seeing the mess humans have made of everything, ever regretted that original decision of creation. It reminded me of a sermon I once heard in which the preacher said that he imagined God, with the ball of earth in his hands that was to become the first person, hesitated, looked at it, hesitated again, and then filled it with his breath. So, if God had known, would he

have gone ahead? But, go back to that original scientific quote – God IS that intelligence outside time and space, so he DID know and, one implication of that is that he and Christ would have had the plan of redemption and salvation in place from the moment of creation.

I remember reading an article in the paper about the media industry. It could also have been about the state of the country. The author said that the current state of affairs reminds him of a time when he was taking down the rigging on his pal's catamaran with his friend, Ed. While he busied himself with the main sail, Ed, who was not much of a sailor, went to take down the small sail in the front of the boat. Instead, he pulled the pin that kept the mast standing and everything – a mass of steel, rope and canvas – came crashing down around them. As they stood there covered in the colossal mess, Ed said quietly, “So what's the next step?”

The good news of John's Gospel is that God knew humans would make a mess of things and that the next step was in place from the beginning. And that the darkness of ignorance and fear and death has been dispelled once and for all by the coming of the Word that reveals to us the only truth that matters, the truth that holds everything together, the truth that at the heart of God there is nothing but LOVE. Amen.