

First Sunday after Christmas – December 29, 2013
Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18
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The Mystery of Incarnation

After Christmas Day, when we heard Isaiah deliver his prophecy and Luke deliver his powerful story and Mary deliver her child, what is there left to say?ⁱ Well, our readings today call us to experience Christmas through a wider plane of vision, and deep mystery. Today, our gospel reads like a headline: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” Yes, and all the other news of our lives and world? – wars, mass shootings, man-made and natural disasters, fiscal cliffs and political gridlock – well, all that matters as well. As I said on Christmas Day, in some sense it seems ridiculous to believe that a 2000-year old news item could still be our headline on this last Sunday of 2013, and make any real difference in the course of our lives and today’s world: “The Word became flesh and *lives* among us.” So, my job today is to point out the power and possibilities of the mystery of this Christmas news, and then step back in wonder and let it speak for itself, as it sinks into our hearts and engages our lives.

You see, anything is possible in a world where God consents to be born. As Irenaeus of Lyons, an early church leader who, around 190CE, wrote, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might make us what he himself is.”ⁱⁱ That’s not only hard to grasp - it is astounding!ⁱⁱⁱ I’m talking about the mystery of the Incarnation—“The Word became flesh,” says John’s gospel, “and lived among us...full of grace and truth.” The very presence and purpose and power of God—the very being of God—became flesh. As Frederick Buechner put it,

“Philosophies which deny the [presence or Spirit of God in our midst, or which deny the] material, the fleshly, the earth-bound, are themselves denied [by the Incarnation of God become Jesus, born of Mary]. Moses at the burning bush was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground [Ex.3:5]; and Incarnation means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it, but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. [So] if we are saved anywhere we are saved here. And what is saved is not some [ghostly] distillation of our bodies and our earth but our bodies and our earth themselves.”^{iv}

This is all a mystery. Now there are mysteries which you can solve just by thinking them through, such as a murder-mystery whose mysteriousness can be dispelled as the truth becomes known. However, again as Buechner points out,

“there are other mysteries which do not conceal a truth that you can think your way to, but whose truth is itself the mystery. [Start] with the

mystery of yourself, for example. The more you try to fathom it, the more fathomless it is revealed to be. No matter how much of yourself you are able to examine, the quintessential part of yourself will always elude you; that is, the part [of you] that is doing [that] examining. Thus you do not solve the mystery, you live the mystery; [you are the mystery]. And you [realize] that not by knowing yourself, but by being yourself. [And all the more with God.] To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail God down; [for] even on Christ the nails proved ultimately ineffective.”^v

For such mystery as the God who became a human and lived and died as one of us—and who is alive today—we have as our best witnesses our Biblical and early church testimonies to this mystery, rooted in the fact of Jesus and its rich backdrop of Mary and Joseph, the star, the angels, Herod, and the rest. It’s plenty to meditate on, now, and for a lifetime.

Today we are drawn to the mystery of the Incarnation of God born Jesus in Bethlehem, not so much seeking a way to explain or figure out this mystery, but rather, seeking an ongoing encounter with this God become human. For in our heart of hearts, we are all seeking a peace and a purpose, a meaning and sense of worth beyond what our own lives and our world can provide. We yearn for something more. So we look for a star to guide us, angels to lead us, but mostly for a Holy Family to embrace us. Our true yearning is for authentic lives lived with real connection to others, God, and ourselves.

And in and beyond that, we encounter an earth-shattering reality—the Word became flesh—with cosmic implications. Hear the words of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writing to the church in Ephesus around 120CE, telling what God was really setting in motion for us in the Incarnation:

“...God was manifest as human for the “newness” of eternal life, and that which had been prepared by God received its beginning. Hence all things were disturbed, because the abolition of death was being planned.”^{vi}

In Jesus of Nazareth—the Word become flesh—we have the astounding inbreaking of the fullness of God into all of life and history...“for us and for our salvation” as the Creed puts it. Only when God cuts through and enters fully into history do our personal and societal and global histories have any real chance of modifying their often self-destructive courses. “Hence all things were disturbed, because the abolition of death was being planned.”

One other testimony to this mystery of mysteries which we celebrate at Christmas is from another early Church leader Melito of Sardis writing around 180 CE. Melito wrote:

“So He has come to us. So although without a body, God has formed for God a body like ours. The one who appeared as a lamb, remained the shepherd; He who was seen as a servant did not renounce His status as Son; He was borne by Mary and clothed with God ...appearing as a child he did not deny the eternity of His nature ...as human himself needing nourishment, yet as God ceaselessly nourishing the world... He stood before Pilate and sat by the Father; He hung on the cross and supported the universe.”^{vii}

Such a testimony, such a mystery could not just be deduced out of the birth of an infant. *He hung on the cross and (simultaneously) supported the universe.* Yes, we are met at Christmas with a baby, but far more than a baby. In the Incarnation—the Word made flesh—the birth of God in human form—the Risk of all risks is taken. The Unknowable becomes known. The Infinite also becomes finite. The Formless takes form. Being itself becomes a being. The Word becomes flesh. God’s deliverance frees the world from the grip of all that distorts our full capacities for goodness, truth and beauty as humans made in the image of God, and this restorative operation was set in motion with the birth of the Christ Child, this Prince of Peace. You were expecting just an innocent baby? Far more than a sweet baby in a stable—far more than one who would become a great teacher even, and an example of how to live—we meet indeed the world’s Deliverer—The Messiah of God—the Christ – fully God and fully human.^{viii}

In conclusion, one reason we may have some trouble apprehending the mystery of the full incarnation of God in Jesus is probably that we have not been able to recognize or admit the mystery of our own, albeit limited, incarnation. It is difficult to accept that the integration of God-with-us that was incarnated – enfleshed - and fully realized in Jesus can also be realized, in part, in us. Our selves on our somewhat insignificant journeys are very likely a microcosm of what God is doing everywhere and what God did perfectly in Jesus. So, if we are to believe the whole, we must start by trying to believe the part. If we are to love God’s beginning and God’s conclusion, then we must try to love God’s process of Word become flesh in Jesus and in ourselves. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end—and much of the middle too—but we are beta, gamma, delta, and so on. It is all one. And we have been made one by God’s yes to flesh in Christ. As Thomas Merton concluded on a Christmas day 46 years ago, “Christ is born to us today, in order that He may appear to the whole world through us. This one day is the day of his birth, but every day of our mortal lives, must be his manifestation.” Amen

ⁱ The best we may be able to do is to stand around the manger and let the hopes and fears of all our years—especially this year—meet in the encounter with the God who came to us as a newborn child. With his birth, so much else was born: a new humanity, a new hope, a new possibility—a new God, as it were, looking back at us with brand new eyes that were older than time itself.

ⁱⁱ Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* , V preface

ⁱⁱⁱ That led another early Christian leader, Tertullian, to quip, “it’s absurd—and therefore utterly credible; impossible...and therefore a fact.” Tertullian, De carne Christi, V

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 43

^v Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 64

^{vi} Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians, 19:1-3

^{vii} Melito, Bishop of Sardis, Fragment 14

^{viii} It bears repeating that it would be silly of us to think it is easy to believe that a babe in a manger—or even later that same young man on a cross—is all it takes to save our souls and the human race from itself. Obviously what happened in Bethlehem 2000 thousand years ago didn’t solve all our problems, nor avert all our war-making and conflict, nor stop every disturbed person from running amok in a school, nor cure all our illnesses, nor prevent our failing and falling and dying. Nonetheless, because everything (and everyone) is related; and because the decision of each event matters for all events; and because fragility and destructiveness are our human realities; the greatest power, then, is a guiding, redeeming, suffering forgiving, and restoring love, God’s incarnate love in Christ, God’s gift to us of God’s own being. At Christmas meet the God who became flesh and who dwelt among us, the one who would live and die and rise again—the same one who is alive today continuing God’s mission, enlisting us to join him in repairing the world and restoring all into right relationships, until the day when God will be all in all.