

**First Sunday after Christmas – December 27, 2015**  
**Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**The Christmas Gospels and The Incarnation**

I am always amazed at how differently the four gospels treat Christmas, this arrival of Jesus in the flesh. Mark's gospel is simple on this subject. It says nothing at all about the arrival. For Mark, what counts the most is Jesus' appearance as an adult, preaching God's Kingdom.

Matthew, on the other hand, has an elaborate drama where Joseph appears as the chief character and is the one in charge, moving the holy family from one place to another at the behest of different dreams he keeps having. Matthew is fascinated by what those outside his own historic faith, i.e. those outside the Jewish tradition, from which the Messiah sprang, have to do in response to this new Savior. That's why Matthew has the story of the three foreigners who come from the east to pay homage to the Christ child. Matthew's view of Christ is that he is Emmanu-el, literally "God with us"—which is not only how Matthew begins his gospel, but ends it as well with the Risen Jesus' words, "I am with you always..."

Then there's Luke, the tender human story-teller. The characters that are portrayed in his Christmas account are Mary, who is center stage throughout several chapters of this drama, along with Mary's cousin, Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, as well as the more societally marginal shepherds and the celestial chorus of angels, and later, old Simeon and the prophet Anna at the presentation of the newborn Jesus at the Temple. Luke's view of Christ is that he is the center of history to which every age can look in hope.

Most subtle by far, though, is John's description of Christmas. Disregarding historical events, dates, names of Emperors—names of almost anyone for that matter—John paints in cosmic brushstrokes the story of God's relation with creation and with the human race. Thus, this prologue to John's gospel which we read today is not about Herald Angels or a Silent Night, or shepherds abiding in their fields. It is the Word from God, the Word who is God given to us, and is a personal Word. It is as personal and intimate as the Mother Mary's embrace of the divine infant. At Christmas, God speaks the Word to each of us in a particular way through Jesus Christ as we celebrate the birth into the world and in our hearts of the God who loves us and who redeems us.<sup>i</sup>

Actually, there is a fifth account of the Christmas story in the New Testament. It's found in the context of the obscure imagery of the Apocalyptic writing called the Revelation to John (Chapter 12), and is, frankly, a little scary. One thing for sure—it portrays powerfully the earth-shattering cosmic upheaval inaugurated by the birth of the Christ child. That account is picked up by Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writing to the church in Ephesus around 120CE—around the same time as the writing of the Revelation to John took place. Ignatius, telling what God set in motion for us in the Birth of the Incarnate Son, wrote:

“...the old kingdom was destroyed, for 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.”<sup>ii</sup>

With that cosmic picture in mind, let’s return to John’s gospel, from which we read our gospel on this first Sunday in Christmastide: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.” On the one hand, John is much more theologically sophisticated than the other three gospel writers. And yet, John’s most central message – that the Word became flesh; the very purpose and being, the power and love of God became flesh - is quite untheological and unsophisticated—even undignified—when matched against the contemporary theologies and philosophies of the greater Greco-Roman world of John’s day. For his message is Incarnation—the Word became flesh—and that’s the way it is. As Frederick Buechner put it,

“All...philosophies that deny the reality or the significance of the material, the fleshly, the earth-bound, are themselves denied [by the fact of Jesus]. Moses at the burning bush was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground (Exodus 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. If we are saved anywhere, we are saved here. And what is [redeemed and restored] is not some [hazy] distillation of our bodies and our earth but our bodies and our earth themselves.”<sup>iii</sup>

And so Christmas is the celebration of the Word become flesh—a very physical event, and not just some disembodied idea of love or some aspect of God’s presence divorced from an earthly historical anchor in the person of Jesus born in Bethlehem.

As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, “Anything is possible in a world where God consents to be born.”<sup>iv</sup> To capture this a bit more, listen to another early Church leader, Melito of Sardis, writing around 180 CE which I share with you again this Christmas Day. 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.”<sup>v</sup>

He hung on the cross and 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 has set about freeing 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, the 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, 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. In Jesus of Nazareth we have the astounding inbreaking of the fullness of God into all of life and history. 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.”<sup>vi</sup>

Blessed Christmas to you all.

---

<sup>i</sup> “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Now a word is not merely the utterance coming from a mouth, rather it is the thought of the heart and the mind behind the utterance. Without this thought the external word is not spoken; or if it is spoken, it has substance only when the word of the mouth is in accord with the word of the heart and the mind. Thus God, too, from all eternity has a Word, a thought, a purpose, and internal utterance, a conversation within God and God's divine heart and mind, so to speak, unknown to mortals. This is called God's Word. From eternity this Word was within God's heart and mind, and through the Word, God resolved to create the universe, and then to redeem it from all that distorted it. But no one was aware of such total resolve until the Word became flesh and proclaimed this to us. Obviously, as we read this prologue of John we see that God's Word given to us is not only personal, i.e. from the very heart of God's Loving Being and Purpose; but is also a Transcendent Word and a Universal Word hear and receive. The Word—the inner thought, the meaning, the purpose, the key, the way, the truth, the life—is at the heart of it all; and it is when that Word is made flesh that things really begin to happen.

<sup>ii</sup> Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians, 19:2-3. See also Ignatius' portrayal of the astonishing mystery of God in Jesus in all its backdrop:

“And the virginity of Mary, and her giving birth, were hidden from the prince of this world, as was also the death of the Lord. *Three mysteries of a cry which were wrought in the stillness of God.* How then was he manifested to the world? A star shone in heaven beyond all the stars, and its light was unspeakable, and its newness caused astonishment; and all the other stars, with the sun and the moon, gathered in chorus around this star, and it far exceeded them in all its light; and there was perplexity, whence came this new thing, so unlike them.”

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 43.

<sup>iv</sup> Clayton L. Morris and Barbara Brown Taylor, Worship and Preaching That Work For Evangelism (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 1992), p. 36.

<sup>v</sup> Melito of Sardis, Fragment 14. See also the testimony from Gregory of Nazianzus,

“For we do not sever the man from the godhead, but lay down...the unity and identity of him who of old was not human but God, but...who in these last days has assumed humanity for our salvation, mortal in his flesh, immortal in his godhead; circumscribed in his body, uncircumscribed in the spirit; at one earthly and heavenly, tangible and intangible, comprehensible and incomprehensible...one and the same who was man, and also God.”

---

<sup>vi</sup> Obviously what happened in Bethlehem 2000 thousand years ago didn't solve all our problems, nor avert all our warmaking and conflict, nor cure all our illnesses, nor prevent our failing and falling and dying. Nonetheless, at the manger we do 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 – and enlisting us to join him in repairing the world and restoring all into right relationship, until the day when God will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23). One reason we may have trouble understanding the full incarnation of God realized in Jesus born in Bethlehem is probably because we have not been able to recognize or admit our own limited incarnation. It is difficult to accept that the integration of God *with us* that was fully incarnated in Jesus can also be realized in part *in us* through the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Ourselves on our journeys are very likely a microcosm of what God is doing everywhere and what God did fully 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 and plan in Jesus *and* in ourselves. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, but we are beta, gamma, delta, and so on. It is all one. And we have been made one by God's Yes to Christ's plan in the flesh. As Thomas Merton concluded on Christmas day 45 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." - Thomas Merton, Seasons of Celebration (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1965), p. 112. See also 17<sup>th</sup> Century German mystic, Angelus Silesius:

Though Christ a thousand times  
In Bethlehem be born,  
If He's not born in thee,  
Thou art still forlorn

The cross on Golgotha  
Will never save thy soul,  
The cross in thine own heart  
Alone can make thee whole.