

Sermon for 1 Christmas
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Holy Nativity, Plano
30 December, 2007

St. Luke gives us the actual narrative of the Nativity of Jesus Christ, that great passage that we read on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But St. John's Gospel spells out the significance and the implications of all that is related in Luke's story. As you will remember, that passage includes this strange line: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Tradition has it that Mary the mother of Jesus lived with John for the rest of her earthly life, after Jesus himself entrusted his mother to John from the cross. And so it seems that this fourth Gospel, almost certainly the last to be written, probably contains in part the ponderings of the one who knew Jesus from his very conception.

Whereas the other Gospel writers begin their stories within human history, St. John insists that to understand the story of Jesus properly one must begin at the beginning ... the very beginning. And so he begins his narrative with the same words (albeit in Greek) as the Torah: In the beginning ... But John is not simply cribbing from Old Testament; he is going beyond it. The book of Genesis tells us what God *did* in the beginning of creation. John tells us something about what God *was before* creation.

And what John tells us is a great development from the Jewish thought in which he was trained. The scripture sometimes speaks of Wisdom as if it were a person with God, whom God sends to help men who seek him. And the Greek word *logos*, which roughly translates to "word", was an appropriate way to refer to the same sort of idea. So that sort of language would be recognizable and perfectly appropriate. But a good Jew would never have taken such a passage literally to mean that there was another distinct person who was divine. In the Jewish mind, that would destroy the whole point of their monotheistic religion.

But here is John, saying that not only was the Word with God in the beginning, not only was it a divine attribute which can be personified in a literary way and spoken of in a figure of speech as a separate entity. Instead, he actually says that this divine word, this Logos, actually is a distinct person, who shares the same divine nature as God. He has life in himself. He doesn't receive it *from* God, as we do. It's just *in* him. And the life that is in the Logos is the only light standing between us and total darkness. It allows us to see what is true, both in ourselves and all around us.

And as soon as we have wrapped our minds around this idea that there is another divine person with God from the beginning, we find that there is more. This person who is the Word, who is somehow equal to God, who has existed

eternally with God, didn't just remain some cosmic divine being. The one through whom all things were created is now a creature himself. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". He wasn't flesh to begin with, but he became flesh. In St. John, flesh isn't the sinful part of us, as it is in St. Paul. But it's the natural, powerless, superficial, the merely human. And the eternal Logos became that for us. But in doing so, he turns the flesh into the vessel for the supernatural, omnipotent, deep reality; no longer merely human, but profoundly human.

The word that is translated "dwelt" here really has a more specific meaning. Literally, the text says that the Word lived in a tent among us. It comes from the same word that is used in Greek to refer to the "tent of meeting" in the Old Testament. This was the tabernacle, where God dwelt among the Israelites in the desert. This is where the glory of God's presence made Moses' face shine. And so John is saying that Jesus the Christ actually was the presence of God among his people, just as God dwelt with his people in the wilderness. "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." And just as God showed undeserved favor to his people in delivering them from slavery in Egypt, so Jesus is was full of grace, showing favor to the undeserving, like us.

Now, you may be asking, "So what?" As Christians, we have heard all of this before. Jesus was God and man. We got it. But I'd like to suggest a few things that come out of this.

First, I hope I've given you an adequate idea of just how *new* an idea this really was. This whole system of thought was not something that could have been derived simply by the use of human reason. It was the result of the experience of those who lived with Jesus and trusted him, and had to work at figuring out what was going on in his life. He fulfilled the expectations of the Old Testament, but not in a way that anyone expected. And so these new thoughts about God are the result of an amazing, life-changing, earth-shaking encounter with the living God in the flesh.

Secondly, no account of the Christian revelation can be adequate if it doesn't begin with, and center on, this reality of the Word made flesh. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity, truly God and truly man, is the very heart and soul of our faith. Jesus is the one who has revealed the Father to us. We do not find ultimate reality in philosophies or systems, no matter how much we may value clear thinking. We find ultimate reality in the life and person of a particular human being, who happens to have lived in Palestine about 2000 years ago, and who also happens to have been God in the flesh. And therefore, we don't find the meaning of our lives in ritual, in philosophy, or in morality. We find the meaning of our lives in a *relationship* with Jesus the eternal Son of God.

And that leads us to my final point. Our Lord Jesus came into the world to give us something. We find it in this same passage, sandwiched between the outrage of the eternal Word and the outrage of the Incarnation of that same eternal Word. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” We are offered a new birth, to become children again, not in the flesh to merely human parents. We’ve done that already. But to start an absolutely new life with God as our Father.

Notice that not all of the human race are children of God. Only those who have received the Incarnate Word. Only those who have trusted in his name. And in this context, the name is not merely a word. It’s our connection with the person of Jesus. To “believe in his name” is to trust him in everything he says about himself and who he is. It’s to enter into that relationship that will give meaning to our lives. It’s to obey everything he tells us in the bible and to welcome his continued presence, power, and authority in our lives, through the Holy Spirit.

Also notice that even we are given power only to *become* children of God. As we continue to receive Jesus, as we continue to trust him and obey him, we begin to share in the divine life that he has in himself. We are truly “born again” with the true life that is of God. And we begin to reflect the character of God, as it is revealed to us in Jesus. Children of God will grow up to be like God, except that we will always be creatures.

As we celebrate this season of the Incarnation, I challenge you to take the life that Jesus offers. I challenge you to become more and more children of God, trusting in the Incarnate Word, and living as members of God’s family.