

1 Christmas (C)

Jn 1.1-18

There is so much going on in today's gospel lesson that anyone called to preach on this text can quickly be driven to despair, and believe me when I say that I'm speaking from experience here. This is one of the most dense and one of the most magnificent passages in all the scriptures, and I hesitate to say anything at all about it because whatever I say will fall short of the insight and the grandeur of the vision of the gospel writer.

But I draw some encouragement here from the fact that the gospel writer himself seems more than a little carried away: it's almost as if he ends up repeatedly tripping over himself in his rush to say all that he wants to say. His sense of awe and reverence, no less than his sense of joy, is so great that he can't get it all out; he's wrestling to put into words something that can never be adequately described by mere human language. And in his desperation, he turns to the very thing that's giving him fits in the hopes that it will help him express what's in his heart and his mind. In his struggle with words, he turns to the reality of *the* Word.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Of course the gospel writer didn't use the term "word." That's our English translation for a term that was originally written in Greek. The term used by the gospel writer is one that would have been immediately familiar to his readers: the term he used was "*logos*." At the time of the writing of John's gospel, this term carried many connotations: it was used to refer to speech, including both divine speech and human speech, but could also be used to refer to reason or logic, or to a rationale or an explanation that one might give. It was a term that was familiar to both Jews and to Gentiles: it appears repeatedly in ancient Greek translations of the Jewish scriptures, and was an important concept in Greek philosophy.

It's helpful to have some sense of the background and the meaning of the language used by the gospel writer, because this helps us better understand the claim that he's making. It's easy for those of us who have heard this story ten or twenty or one hundred times to overlook the significance of what John is saying. John makes a rather remarkable claim.

During the season of Christmas, we are repeatedly invited to reflect on the birth of Jesus. The gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke draw our attention to a newborn child sleeping in a manger. But John is different: John goes all the way back to the beginning of time itself and draws our attention to the creation of the world in order to make sense of the identity of the one he's trying to describe.

This is John's version of the Christmas story: "In the beginning was this child, and this child was with God, and this child was God. ... All things came into being through this child, and without this child not one thing came into being. What has come into being through this child is life, and this life is the light of all people."

This is the gospel writer's claim: that in this child God himself, the one on whom all things depend, the creator of the entire universe, became incarnate and dwelt among human beings. If

this idea doesn't strike us as simultaneously remarkable and scandalous, then I would suggest we're not paying attention. Because if the gospel writer is right, then *everything* depends on this little child whose birth we commemorate this season. The meaning of the world is found in this child. The meaning of history is found in this child. The meaning of your life and of my life and of our life together is to be found in this child.

In other words, if John is right then the destiny of the entire creation is bound up and resolved in this child. He himself is life, and his life is the light and life of all people and of all things. Our life is first and foremost the life he gives to us, a life that we share with all things that have received life from him.

But what does this mean? What does that mean for us today, who live in a very different place and a very different time than the one into which this child was born? The gospel writer is clear that this story is just as much about us as it is about those who first heard it: "what has come into being in [the Word] was life, and this life was the light of all people." *All* people; not just for those who happened to live at the same time Jesus did, but all people, those who came after him and even those who went before him. So if this story is indeed for us, what might it mean for us to say that this child is the life and the light of our lives?

Both "life" and "light" are images that appear repeatedly in John's gospel. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we usually hear salvation described in terms of the kingdom of God, but in John we hear about life, usually "new life" or "eternal life." Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." To the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well he offers a drink of "living water," a "spring of water gushing up to eternal life." To the religious leaders who questioned his authority, Jesus responded that "just as the Father has life in himself, so too has he granted the Son to have life in himself," so that all who believe may have eternal life. New life, eternal life, real life: it's all over John's gospel.

It's the same with light. Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus, "Light has come into the world." He tells a group of religious leaders, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." When he's confronted by a crowd of people who can't quite figure him out, he tells them, "The light is with you for a little while longer. ... While you have the light, believe in the light so that you may become children of light." Like life, the idea of Jesus as the light of the world is all over John's gospel.

And one of the most important things John has to say about this life and this light is that it's a gift. It's not something we have to earn, it's something God gives us. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jesus refers to the living water he offers as the "gift of God." This is important, because it helps us to understand the way that the life and the light that Jesus brings comes to us today: throughout John's gospel, when Jesus speaks about the gifts that he brings he's usually talking about the Holy Spirit.

In the third chapter of John, Jesus is described as the one "whom God has sent," the one who "gives the Spirit without measure." He tells the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well that true worship is to be offered "in spirit and in truth." He tells Nicodemus that in order to see the

kingdom of heaven one must be “born of water and the spirit.” Throughout John’s gospel, there is a double gift being given: Jesus is the gift of the Father, bringing with him grace and truth, and the Spirit is the gift of the Son, bringing with him the light and the life of the Son.

It is because of the gift of the Holy Spirit that we are able to experience the life and the light of Jesus today; through the Holy Spirit, the glory of the Father, the grace and truth that Jesus brings, is given to us as well. Towards the end of John’s gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “Because I live, you also will live, and on that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”

This is how it is possible for God to be present to us today, not just as a memory of something long since past or as a fleeting emotional response to holiday sentiment. Rather, what we commemorate this season is the gift of God’s presence with us today, a gift that comes to us through the abiding presence of the living Word made manifest through the Holy Spirit. And the gift of God’s presence raises us to new life and calls us to share this gift of life and light with the world.

The Spirit testifies to Jesus: Jesus says as much when he tells his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own but . . . will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Jesus testifies to the Father: Jesus says as much when he tells the scribes and the Pharisees, “I can do nothing on my own, but only what I see the Father doing.” And we are those who testify to what the Father, through his Word and Spirit, has done for us. Like John the Baptist, we are sent by God to bear witness to the light, to bear witness to the new life of God poured out onto the world through the incarnation of God’s Word.

So go and tell it on the mountain; tell it in the streets and in the workplace and in the market and in the home: Jesus Christ is born. God has sent us salvation, and the gift of his eternal life has been given to all people. Go and preach the word at all times: preach the word in your thought and your action, preach the word with your heart and your soul and your mind and your body, and the peace of Christ, the gift that comes to us as a little child, will keep you in faith, hope, and love all the days of your life. Amen.

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