

The Poetry of Christmas

sermon digest

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John 1:1-14

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On my birthday this year I received an email from my older sister detailing the event of my birth. I was fascinated by the perspective of a seven-year-old child and grateful beyond measure for dimensions of the story that I had never heard before. In search of work, our family had made a home in Hobbs, New Mexico; but they spent the summer of 1939 in my grandparents' overcrowded house in rural Oklahoma, waiting for the baby. Mother needed to be near her mother and wanted old Dr. Dean to manage the birth. My sisters had to spend the afternoon in the home of Aunt Ocie, Grandmother's sister, but were not told why. "Back then," she observed "babies just appeared, but children were definitely not told how or why. Very few at the time, were born in the hospital. I can remember looking you over and being excited that I had a baby brother."

The gift of memory was the best birthday present ever. As our family grew, every year on our children's birthdays we could expect a "happy birthday" phone call from their maternal grandparents. Always the call included a memorial of the day. Michelle was born on January 20. I dare say that she could recount today the details right down to the moment when Grandpop slipped and fell on the ice. The gift of memory was a wonderful tradition that says, "your coming into the world was historic, an event worth remembering."

Something of that message comes through in the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke. Mark is silent about the birth. Perhaps the stories were not known to Mark, or possibly he did not see their importance. Matthew and Luke seemed to have had a copy of Mark on the desk as they wrote, but they each decided to include a birth story, our only source for Christmas.

I can't help but believe that the author of John's Gospel was aware of the birth stories, but he chose to take another approach to the beginning of the gospel. Instead of a slant on history, "while Quirinius was governor of Syria," John looked beyond history to the beginning of beginnings: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Matthew and Luke chose to write in prose of events within the range of human memory with interludes of commentary. John's message is sheer poetry. In fact, the best scholars believe that he combined and edited two known poems to reach beyond the range of human memory to the ultimate moment of God's act of creation. Like Genesis, the poetry of John's Prologue reaches beyond the science of birth or the facts of history in the way that only poetry can do.

The gospel of Christmas is art rather than science. We need to put aside arguments over the virginal conception of Jesus, angelic visitors, and a star guiding the magi. The classical art of music and painting as well as the amateur productions of nativity scenes and Christmas cantatas do more to proclaim the truth of God in Christ than any of our intellectual pursuits of fact. The story of Christmas is more art than history, and the emotional level of music and drama are the ideal media for proclaiming the birth of Messiah. In their own way, all of the Gospels got it right.

Even the prosaic stories of Matthew and Luke come in images that reach beyond the crass marketplace of facts. If we allow the music of Advent to flow through Matthew and Luke as we would listen to the movements of a symphony, the revelation of God in Christ begins to fly on wings of song. Advent begins with the distant beat of the Old Testament prophets and the struggle of Israel. The subdued, personal tones of a flute present the visitation of angels announcing the purpose of God in the birth of John and Jesus. The soft solos of preparation are interrupted by the mighty sound of a heavenly chorus singing the *Gloria* at the birth of the Christ. Then, turning to Matthew, brass announces the visitation of magi from the East and the mysterious strains of the oboe warn of Herod's threat. The rush of the strings follows the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt and, back to Luke, develop into a melodious background for the Temple visitation with Simeon and Anna.

John seems to hear the music best. John actually begins with hymns that had been around for awhile. Jews had borrowed the hymns to the Eternal Logos from Hellenic Jews and identified the Greek Logos with the Jewish Word of God in creation. Reginald Fuller observed that everything in the hymn up to verse fourteen could have come from Hellenic Judaism. But the single statement, "The Word became flesh" was only possible within Christianity and only as a result of the encounter with

the Jesus of history. The barrier between God and the people made in the divine image has become a door. Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us."

Logos the Word reveals the nature of God. The nature of God is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. The God above and beyond us is also God with us. The holiness of God is God's otherness—other than creation, other than humanity. God is not a good ole' boy that we can slap on the back and allow into our world at our wish and whim. God is the author of creation. Long before anyone's birth, this was God's world.

The first principle of worship is to come in reverence before the Almighty. Moses took off his shoes at the burning bush because he stood in the presence of God. The Prophets radically opposed images of God which suggested any similarity to things created. The first principle of life for the Jews in the Decalogue was, "no other gods before me." But nothing could be more repugnant to the Greek mind than that the eternal Logos could become mortal human flesh. Nothing could be more difficult for the Jewish theology than the suggestion that God has come to us in human flesh. Yet John brought the hymn to its highest idea, and the refrain of Advent has become: "the Word became flesh and lived among us."

Logos the Word reveals the true human nature. The truth about people in general, about you in particular, is reflected in the mirror of the man Jesus. We can judge people by the evil which dominates our news, and our judgments become a condemnation of the Creator as well as ourselves. If the truth of human nature is reflected in the behavior of the tyrants of history like Hitler or Gaddafi, God help us! The Incarnation of God in Christ sets a new standard for human possibility. What if God really made all of us to be like Jesus? What if we began to think of ourselves and to impress upon our children that we are the Body of Christ intended to reflect God in our nature, that we are the children of our Heavenly Father, and Jesus is our brother.

On Christmas morning, we worship God in celebration of the story, an event that gave meaning to all of history, and more. The coming of Christ was the ultimate act of God, comparable only to the creation of the world. The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.