



SAINT LUKE'S

FIRST AFTER CHRISTMAS
YEAR B

ISAIAH 61:10-62:3
GALATIANS 3:23-25; 4:4-7
JOHN 1:1-18
PSALM 147

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

DECEMBER 31, 2017

It's a funny thing, the difference an origin story can have on the rest of the story. The gospel narratives have, over the many years of their predominance over western religious thought, experienced a sort of conflation; we've gotten so used to telling the Jesus story chronologically that we fail remember the distinct qualities and characteristics of each gospel writer's perspective. The story, it is assumed, begins with the birth of Jesus in a manger to Mary and Joseph, but I think many outside this congregation would be surprised to learn that Luke is the only gospel to present to us with the journey to Bethlehem, the manger, the angels, the shepherds, etc.

Matthew, in his pursuit of showing us that Jesus is the Messiah from the house of David, gives us the entire genealogy of Jesus stretching back to Adam, with only a few lines devoted to the annunciation by the angel Gabriel, Joseph's surprise at learning of the whole matter, and a simple clause stating that they named the child Jesus. Mark, as we heard a few weeks ago, skips over Jesus' birth narrative entirely, opening with 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' and heading straight into John the Baptizer's preparatory work for Christ's ministry. Luke's is the most detailed of the birth narratives, with multiple chapters devoted to the historical and political context, the angelic announcements to Elizabeth's husband and Mary, and the famous Christmas story with all the trimmings.

The gospel of John, instead, goes for a deep cut. "In the

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” John does not choose the physical birth of Jesus of Nazareth as his starting point, but goes back to ‘the beginning’, setting up, as Fr William mentioned on Christmas day, the New Testament parallel to the creation narrative in Genesis. John chooses his words carefully here, something which is lost a bit in the translation from the Greek to the English. This word for ‘beginning’ is the word *αρχή*, and it doesn’t simply mean a chronological beginning, like 0:00 (triple zeroes) on a stopwatch. In fact, that’s sort of the exact opposite of what John is going for. Instead, he pairs this word for beginning with the word *λόγος*, which is translated as ‘word’ but is more fully understood as ‘the reason or rationale, the fundamental ordering principle...the grounding idea of a philosophical argument.’ It is not ‘word’ in a lexical or grammatical sense, like a ‘vocabulary word’. When paired together, *αρχή* and *λόγος* mean something closer to **‘The Original Reason’**. This helps us understand what John means when he says “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Paul says it this way in his letter to the Colossians: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in

him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.” (1:15-18)

Christ did not begin with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth! What John is telling us is that Jesus, as the Logos, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity, is the foundation and source of all that is and ever will be created. Christ is the canvass on which all of the universe is painted...and the brush...and the paint. Paul stressed this when preaching in Acts: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ (17:28)

This fundamentally reshapes how we view the Incarnation of Christ. The birth of Jesus was not some far off and distant God deciding to drop in and see how his divine game of The Sims was working out. The Incarnation we celebrate in Christmas was the source of Life itself choosing to remove any barrier and enter into the joys and sorrows of a particular existence in order to restore our experience of Life. Just as the act of Creation was an expression of Love between the members of the Trinity, so too the Incarnation is an expression borne from the wellspring of Life to free us from the patterns of death which we have created for ourselves. Jesus tells us this in John 10: ‘I have come that they might have life and have it to the full’ (v.10)

That the source of Life might share in our life to free us from

death provides us with a fuller understanding of what our experience of salvation is truly meant to be. It is not simply waiting for a better experience on the other side of death, or the good fortune to be delivered from some fiery pit, but it is something we live into in our daily lives: It is experiential and transformational. This is the whole reason for the Incarnation. Jesus models for us how our bodies, our hearts and minds, and our spirits are all vehicles to draw us closer to the source of Life: Himself. Salvation is the process of growing more and more into the likeness of the image of God Himself. What does God look like? John tells us: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”(v 18) Or as Paul said earlier: “He is the image of the invisible God”.

St Irenaeus is commonly quoted as saying ‘The glory of God is the human being fully alive’. Our experience of salvation is the process of moving closer to Christ, the source of Life, and experiencing freedom from old habits, unhealthy desires, broken relationships, and the misuse of our will and abilities for our own selfish gain and towards those behaviors, thoughts, and ways of being which are generative, or life-giving. We are saved, are being saved, and will be saved as we draw closer to the very source of our existence and allow the power of Divine Love to bring us into new and fuller ways of living for God’s glory and the good of all.

The beginning of John’s gospel affirms for us that Christmas is not simply the celebration of a singular man of goodwill, nor just the

birth of a divine god-man, but the infinite mystery that the source of Life and Reality itself entered into our reality to draw us to a fuller life.

It is our reason for existence as a church to model this renewed life to our friends, families, neighbors, enemies, communities. We must be consistently aware that this life is not simply for our benefit, but the renewal of the world. But do not let the scope of this work deter you: The birth of Christ shows us that this universal work begins in particular places, with particular people, like Bethlehem, like Mary and Joseph. Like Manhattan; like you and me.

May Life itself spring anew in our hearts this Christmastide, renewing us and all those whose lives we touch.

Amen.

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