

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day • December 25, 2017

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 98 • Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12) • John 1:1-14

Last week, our youth presented their annual Christmas pageant. This year it was from St. Luke's story. Shepherds. Animals. A manger. They could have just as easily done St. Matthew's version with King Herod and the magi with their gifts. But there is a reason why, in the past two thousand years, no pageant has tried to tell the Christmas story according to St. John.

Maybe that's because it feels so cold. So distant. Like St. John is trying to playing some kind of word game instead of telling us something about Jesus. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning through God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In the world that was created through him, though that world did not recognize him. Get distracted by the stacks of prepositions and you'll miss it, the Christmas story according to St. John: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth."

The Word became flesh. That's a tough one to get your head around. The first Christians nearly tore the church into pieces trying to figure out how that was possible. Is Jesus God or is he man? For most of us, it seems a given that Jesus was a person and we can agree to disagree on whether he's also God or not. Not so for those earliest Christians. One of the earliest heresies that the church had to get figured out was the Docetic controversy. And unlike us twenty-first century Christians who take it for granted that Jesus was a man and have a hard time believing whether he was divine or not, they had the opposite problem. They assumed that Jesus was God, but they couldn't wrap their heads around God becoming human. Being born? Walking around dirty city streets? Being killed on a cross? Not exactly fitting stuff for God to be doing. So they said that Jesus was really just God pretending to be a person. He wasn't actually human, he just seemed like he was a human.

We've since written the Docetists off as heretics and relegated them to the pile of early church trivia. But no one is a heretic on purpose. And most of the ideas the early church branded with the H-word had some reasonable concern lying behind them. For the Docetists, it was a belief that the world is a bad, dangerous, unredeemable place. And so they wanted, more than anything, to protect God from the painful experiences of life that we all have to deal with. It's as if they said, "You know what? Don't come to us, we'll come to you."

One of the great ironies of the Christian faith is that grace is a very difficult thing to come to terms with. That when we receive grace in our lives, we often try to pay it back somehow. Or to say that it's too much and you really shouldn't have. Or to say that we haven't done anything to deserve it, which is the whole point.

No one in this room would actually describe ourselves as Docetists, but most of us kind of like that idea, the idea that salvation is about getting away from the world. Because it allows us to get away from people we don't agree with. It absolves us from the hard work of building and sustaining communities. It allows us to wash our hands of fixing the world's problems. It lets us baptize our cynicism and call it maturity. It lets us pretend that there's no possibility of salvation or redemption in this life.

You see that in our culture's obsession with the rapture. You hear that in the claim that the only way for the church to deal with a changing world is to retreat further away from it. You see it in the indifference some Christians have about social problems because they think they're not sticking around much longer anyway. You hear it in the preachers who tell people they need to be saved

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from their culture or their sexuality. There are no shortage of people who think salvation is something that happens somewhere else.

For St. John, salvation is about something else entirely. Salvation isn't about us escaping the world to get closer to God. It's about God coming among us. What our confirmation kids would call "down religion." And not just God becoming "like" a person or God becoming the "idea" of a person. But God becoming flesh. It's interesting that John chooses "flesh" instead of "human" or "a person." It's as if John wants to say that Jesus had our experiences. Because our flesh carries our experiences in it. Callouses. Scars. Stretch marks. Flesh that grows. Flesh that gets tired. Flesh that is capable of being hurt. It's no coincidence that later in John's gospel, when Jesus appeared to Thomas after his resurrection, his flesh still bore wounds from his crucifixion. The idea that struck those early Christians as offensive is exactly what St. John believes is so important.

The word John uses to describe how God became flesh can also be translated as "dwelled" or "tabernacled" among us. That "tabernacled" one is especially important. In the Hebrew Bible, God brought the Israelites out of slavery into the wilderness and invited them to build a tabernacle where God could live, so that God can be with them wherever they go. So wherever they went, the tabernacle would go with them. And wherever they would camp, they would set up the tabernacle next to them. But now, St. John says, God is no longer just with them but one of them. God dwells not in a structure that you can pack up and carry around as you need to, but God resides in a person. No longer just with us but among us. Gerry Lauro's favorite Bible translation says that God "moved into the neighborhood," which is a little informal but gets the point across.

It's a controversial enough statement just to say that this Word became flesh and lived among us. That is plenty enough to talk about. But St. John says something more. That because the Word has become flesh in Jesus, we have seen God's glory. John doesn't just say that God becoming a person was some embarrassing thing God had to do to help us out. John says that it's precisely by becoming flesh that God's glory is revealed. What seems like an embarrassment, something to protect God from, is actually the way in which the glory of God's creation is revealed. Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, the experiences of life that we want to protect God from are actually the very means by which the glory of God shines forth. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." That God not only speaks through women and men in every age but lived as one of us. That what we see in Jesus's life is no less than the revelation of God's own love for us.

And not just that. The story of Christ's incarnation is not something that we're invited sit and think about. Not a theory to keep in our heads. Not a riddle to be solved. We might think this Word become flesh stuff is a little abstract, a little distant, a little impersonal. But John says that it's at the very core of who we are. That by taking on our flesh, Christ gives us the "power to be children of God" who shine our light into the world.

Jesus invites us to reflect God's glory by inviting us into relationship with Godself and with others. You're not going to see the glory of the Lord by getting away from the world, John says. You're going to see the glory of the Lord by going further into it. Who does the glory of the Lord shine on? According to St. John, it shines on people like Nicodemus, the bookish Pharisee who can't figure out what to make of Jesus. It shines on people like the Samaritan woman who has been ostracized from her community. It shines on people like the man born blind, whose connection with Jesus gets him kicked out of his family. It shines on people like Martha, grieving the loss of Lazarus.

Christ's incarnation offers no quick fixes. No easy answers. No promises of a life free of suffering. John never promises that there won't be darkness. Only that the darkness will never

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overcome the light. That we always have reason and cause for hope. That's what it means to have the "power to be children of God." The power to proclaim the Word of God in many and various ways to a world that is still living in darkness.

It seems unlikely that the Sunday school kids will reenact St. John's Christmas story next year. But we're given something even better. A promise that whenever we gather around this table, at the font, or around God's Word, the Word that was there in the beginning is present among us. Speaking words of grace, freedom, and truth.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor