

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS DAY | DECEMBER 25, 2023

ISAIAH 52:7-10 | PSALM 98 | HEBREWS 1:1-4 | JOHN 1:1-14

After Christmas last year, I took a few days off to think about anything besides Christmas. Sports. Taxes. Maybe even Easter. Just no more Christmas. One of those days, I went out to run some errands and decided to have lunch in the little café at the grocery store to save some time. So I found an empty table, one next to a group of seniors, and sat down. And as soon as I sat down, I wished that I'd sat at a different table. Because this group was debriefing the Christmas sermons they'd heard earlier that week. And they were not happy.

One of them was particularly upset. And the issue, as best I could tell, was this. His pastor's sermon was all about the newness of Christmas. The new call to Mary to be the Mother of God. The new gift given to the Gentiles. The new experience of Emmanuel, God with us. But, this man protested, wasn't Christmas actually about the old? Wasn't it about the words of the prophets? Wasn't it about the hope for restoration? Wasn't it about the promise of the messiah?

So which is it? Is Christmas old? Or is Christmas new?

The short answer is both. The long answer is in today's reading from the book of Hebrews. "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."

On the one hand, there's something old happening. All of those prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and the rest. Those were, Hebrews reminds us, heralds of God's word. They were not coming up with new material. They were reminding people of their covenant with God and their responsibilities to each other. And Jesus even says that his ministry isn't meant to contradict the teaching of the prophets. So there's a continuity here.

But on the other hand, there is something different happening here. A radical break happening in history. God has now spoken, not in messages and visions given to the prophets, but in a human life. Jesus is, as St. John reminds us, God's first, last, and ultimate word to us. Jesus shows us what God is like.

In other words, what's different isn't the message. What's different is the medium. And that makes all the difference for us as the people of God.

Because what you want from the prophet is really the teaching, the advice, or the guidance. And the prophets know this. Most of them have a kind of "takeaway" message. Amos's takeaway is for people to pursue righteousness. Micah's takeaway is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. Jeremiah's takeaway is for people to seek the welfare of the city. Prophets are always pointing us somewhere else. John makes it explicit in today's gospel. "[John the Baptist] was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." To point people toward it. Prophets don't necessarily want disciples, they want people to do something.

But John tells us that Jesus is something more than a prophet. Because he is here not to point us to something else but to draw us to himself. To be in the light, to use John's image, is not to know something or even to behave a certain way, but to be in relationship with God through Christ. To be in Jesus's company. There is no "takeaway" message from Jesus. There is no advice that you write down and then go use on your own. There is simply

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faith and love that comes from staying with him, abiding with him, and trusting that there is no other place we're supposed to be.

There's something deeply countercultural about this. I don't know about you, but I find myself constantly second-guessing whether I'm really where I'm supposed to be. Sometimes it's about things that don't really matter. Maybe you go out for a pizza, and you like it until you start wondering if you should have gone to that other place down the street instead. But sometimes it's serious. Maybe you take a new job, build a new relationship, move to a new city, start a new chapter in life, and it's great until you start wondering if maybe you'd be happier if you'd done something else.

These are not entirely new concerns. Even in the early monastic traditions of the church, you can find examples of monks who would bounce from community to community without ever really settling down anywhere. They liked their community well enough, but then they started wondering if maybe the other monastic community down the street was better. They would spend their whole lives trying to find something perfect. They never did.

If our ability to stay with Jesus depends on our ability to trust our judgement or stay focused, then we're probably not going to be able to do it very well.

But John makes it clear that this lasting relationship doesn't begin with us. It begins with God. "The Word became flesh," John says, "and lived among us." In the incarnation, God commits to being fully present with us. To hold nothing back. To have no limit on what that encounter can bear.

We can abide with Jesus, we can stay with Jesus, we can live in his light, not because of our own choices or striving or merits. But because of God's commitment to abide, to stay, to live with us. In the birth of Jesus, the love of God is here for good. It's here for our good, for our welfare, for our liberation, and for our salvation. And it's also here for good. For now, for forever, and every time in between.

This unexpected, unmerited, and unending relationship, St. John tells us, is the glory of God. And in the glory of this relationship, in the light of Christ's love, everything old has been made new.

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