



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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CHRISTMAS DAY 2017
ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-12; JOHN 1:1-14

A WORD ABOUT CHRISTMAS



JOHN 1:1-14 [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. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of 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.]

Merry Christmas!

Well, we make a turn this morning...After excited children have flitted about as angels

and shepherds, inviting us to live the tender story of yuletide joy; after safety pins and duct tape have done their work holding

costumed cherubs in character; after we've shared the heart-warming familiar story of Mary and Joseph, and we've sung our carols sung by candlelight; after babes have been wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in mangers; after wrapping paper has been ripped apart to reveal the gifts given in a ritual of Christmas morning glee, today we get this sublimely peculiar prologue from John's gospel as we probe the dense mystery of the Incarnation.

It is too much to angle in from just one direction. The meaning of Christmas will not be constrained by the limits of our human imagination, nor can it be confined to one spin of the earth—today we set sail full mast into the Christmas season, twelve days, the fullness of time, inviting us to revel and ponder, because neither act alone can sufficiently plumb the fathomless meaning and mystery of God's gift—Incarnate Love come into the world.

There is nothing prosaic about this feast, and our words must take on poetic heft to even approach the mystery. Which is why we hear once more today from the gospel of John, and his proposition of grace and truth.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...

Fleming Rutledge says as we stand in this cold broken world, we may not be able to warm our hands by this passage the same way that hearing of Jesus born of Mary in that little town of Bethlehem, but there is nevertheless remarkable beauty to be gleaned here—and not just the doctrinal morsels served up by ancient councils of the Church which drew heavily from these first verses of John's gospel.

What does it mean to speak of the Word?

In some ways, our words fail us, because while they are symbolic in their meaning as they represent something else in experience, they are not that which they signify. So if I say the word "apple" you might consciously consider a red, round piece of fruit, but the word (a-p-p-l-e) is not the fruit.

This is all the more the case when we speak of mystery, and especially divine matters, our Ground of Being. We most often use the word GOD, but imagining GOD is a bit harder than an apple, right?

We need symbolic language, which must also be poetic—it must strike our ears and our hearts in a way that stirs our souls, that strikes the tether line between our very being and the source of all Being, so that we resonate with the cosmic hum of delight.

In one sense, words are merely air passing over flesh causing it to vibrate, but there is no need for words to be spoken unless they are shared, unless they are heard by another. Indeed, anthropologists say language would not have developed if humans were solitary. Their meaning comes in the communal experience of them.

It's the same for the Word about which John speaks—the Word was with God, the Word was God, a communal experience, and all things came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. Or to say it another way: Nothing resonated with the cosmic hum of divine delight without the Word's infusion of grace and truth, and if we follow that thought experiment, we must conclude that everything that exists resonates with that

cosmic hum of divine delight. That is the gift of Christmas!

The Greek word in this passage that we translate as Word is, of course, Logos. The notion of Logos had been buzzing through ancient philosophical conversations for five hundred years when John wrote it down here in reference to Jesus the Christ. Logos operated in an economy of symbolic language as a principle of order and knowledge, but in that realm of logic, it was bound by the constraints of human understanding.

The radical idea appropriated by John in this poetic trope takes it to a whole other dimension, unbound by human limitations, and we must be willing to let it reside in the realm of mystery, even if those that followed him wanted to parse it with doctrinal arithmetic. Nothing wrong with that as long as we know we cannot really know it all.

We cannot render God's nature generally, or the mystery of the Incarnation specifically, to a taxonomy of human understanding.

And yet here we are, on this Christmas Day, using our words the best way we know how, to strike courageously on the chords of divine grace and truth that come to us, day by day, and especially on this day, with the Word made flesh, letting the Spirit's air pass across our flesh in vibrant joy as we give voice in our own right to Emmanuel—that Incarnate Love has come into the world.

It is Christmas, my friends, and you and I exist to resonate with that cosmic hum of divine delight this day and always. Thanks be to God for that!

Merry Christmas!



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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