

Feast of the Incarnation
December 25, 2016
John 1:1-14
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Have you ever noticed that when you get together with your family and start telling stories about when you were growing up, or what happened years ago, the same events sound very different as different people tell the story? Depending on who is describing it, the guy who used to live across the street was a scrooge or a saint. Or that move from one town to another was either a disaster, a wonderful escape, or something indifferent and hardly noticed. Same event, different points of view.

We have in today's gospel reading John's version of the Christmas story. It is written in the form of poetry, a sort of mystical poetry. This is the third time the gospel writers tell the Christmas story. And John's version is very different from Matthew's and Luke's. There is no mention of Mary and Joseph and the manger, no reference to angels, shepherds, or magi. No recounting of who was in political power at the time, no mention of a journey back to Bethlehem to be registered for a census of the citizen tax base. Next to Matthew and Luke, John's telling sounds downright strange and nearly incomprehensible to us. But different folks in the Christian family are telling the same story.

Luke, who wrote the familiar story we heard last night was a physician and a bit of an historian. He was very concerned with getting dates and rulers right, and locating everything in time and space. He was also likely a gentile, and was very concerned about the role of people, who like himself, were considered outsiders. So he is more concerned with shepherds – who were social outcasts – than about kings. And Luke tells much of the story from the perspective of Mary – a radical move in itself, since women were even lower on the social ladder than shepherds.

Matthew is more traditional. He was a Jew and may have been a scribe. He was very concerned with making it clear that Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies as Messiah, King of Jews. He cared much about the flight to Egypt and parallels of the Exodus in Jesus' return from Egypt to Israel. And Matthew's version tells the story from Joseph's point of view.

Then we come to John. John likely knew, in one way or another, about the stories of Matthew and Luke, and he probably assumes his readers would know them too. But John is a theologian – he is concerned about finding ways to describe who God is and what God is like, and John is also a mystic. So John writes about the meaning of Jesus'

coming, based on his theology and the holy imagination of his prayers. It is the same story - all three gospel writers are talking about the same birth.

John begins the story much earlier – he reminds us that Christmas begins just before where the story from Genesis begins – before the beginning with God in creation. John's language harkens back to Genesis. He begins talking about the Word of God – that is, God in action, God creating, revealing, redeeming. In nine words John tells the Christmas story: "And the Word became flesh, and lived among us." The One who was with God in creation, the one who is God at work in history and human life, this one became a living person, became flesh, as completely human as you and me. A person who was God's own self. This is John's account of Jesus' birth.

So we have the richness of three Christmas stories. There is a point of commonality in the three stories. There is one image, one symbol that all three gospel writers use to talk about Jesus' birth. They all talk about light – the light of the star which led the magi, the light that shone around the shepherds, the true light that enlightens every human person. They all continue Isaiah's vision of light shining on those who live in "a land of deep darkness".

We know something of darkness don't we? By virtue of its being winter – days are short and nights are long – we spend more time in darkness than light at this time of year. Personally, nationally, and globally, we have lived through periods of darkness, and contend still with forces of darkness.

Light has a prominent place in our liturgy – we light candles when we gather to share the Eucharist. The new fire is lit at the beginning of the Easter Vigil and the lighted Paschal candle leads the way into the darkened church for the telling of our salvation story, with the deacon stopping three times on the way to sing, "The light of Christ", and the people responding with "Thanks be to God." The person who comes to receive the Sacrament of holy baptism is presented with a lit candle symbolizing the light of Christ. We lit candles last night on Christmas Eve to celebrate the coming of Jesus to the world as God's light.

What John, Luke and Matthew all say about Christmas is that in Jesus, the light and life of God is revealed and becomes made plain, and by that light we can truly begin to see. By that light we can begin to see who we are and who we are created to be. For it is in the person of Jesus that what it means to be a fully alive human being is finally made clear. In Jesus we see that our lives are made whole as we surrender them in love and service. In Jesus we see that really being alive means risking everything for – and because of – the love of God and the coming of God's reign. In Jesus we see that hope

needs never be abandoned – never – and that we contain possibilities beyond our imagining.

And by Jesus' coming into the world we begin to see God really clearly for the first time. All that we thought about God, all we had figured out, all that we were sure we knew about God – all of that is put to the test in Jesus. Who God is, in relationship to us, is fully revealed in Jesus. Not in just one sermon or parable or miracle, but in all of him – in his life, death, and resurrection – we finally have the light to see God. We have the light to come to know and experience more deeply that God has come to us in love with salvation, for the healing and transformation of our lives.

So, what do we need Jesus the light to do in our lives this Christmas Day, this Christmas season? Perhaps we need Jesus the light to reveal something to us about ourselves that needs changing – a habit, a relationship that needs mending, a way of thinking.

Or maybe we need Jesus the light to illuminate our path, so that we can take the next step toward something good and life-giving God is offering us.

Perhaps we need Jesus the light simply to be present to warm our hearts and lift our spirits, so that we can pass the light on to others.

Maybe we need to be reminded again that Jesus the light offers welcome and hospitality to everyone.

And maybe we need Jesus the light to shine so clearly and brightly that we can continue to see what is true and what is false, what is real and what is illusion. With Jesus the light we can stand with courage to face our fears and not allow the unknown and the darkness to overwhelm us.

Today is the first of twelve days of Christmas, of light and joy and gladness. We are not alone. Christ the light is with us, for us, and in us. Let's share that good news! Amen.