

*Sermon - First Sunday after Christmas – December 30, 2007 – St. Paul’s Cathedral, San Diego, California – Richard Lief*

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalms 147:13-21

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

You and I make our home on a planet that is evolving and revolving at 900 miles per hour. We orbit at 19 miles per second around the sun. The sun, stars, and all that we can see is moving at a million miles per day. Our galaxy contains 100 billion stars and is one of millions and billions – and the universe keeps expanding and expanding. I am forever awed by these cosmic revelations.

In our Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer C reminds us with these words: “At your command, all things came to be; the vast expanse of interstellar space; galaxies, suns, the planets in their course, and this fragile earth, our island home. We respond by saying: “By your will they were created and have their being.”

In cosmic language, John, in the prologue to his gospel proclaims: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him, was not anything made, that was made.”

For the ancient Hebrew, the spoken word was fearfully alive. It was a unit of energy charged with power. In his commentary, William Barclay describes it this way “...the words became alive, and walked up and down the hearts of the hearers.”

In the book of Genesis we read that Word of God is the creating power. God spoke and it was so.

In ancient Greek culture, the Word was translated as Logos. The Logos was the principle of order under which the universe continued to exist. What gave a person reason and knowledge of the truth, and the ability to judge between right and wrong, was the Logos of God, dwelling in each person.

As St. John's prologue puts it: "...in the Logos was life, and the life was the light of all people." Logos is the power which makes sense of the world. It brings order instead of chaos.

The cosmology of John identifies Jesus with the Logos. John's prologue is a hymn of praise of the Logos becoming flesh and dwelling among us. It is an interpretation, a witness, a testimony of the Christian experience of John's community in the late first century. It is a statement of their experience of what Marcus Borg calls "the post-Easter Christ." Christ experienced after his resurrection.

Jesus was the light that lead them out of darkness; the spiritual food that nourished them in the midst of their journey; the way that led from death to life.

We are reminded of the Isaiah passage which we heard as our Old Testament passage for this morning. Isaiah is speaking of the deliverance of the people of Israel from exile. His whole being exults in his God. He says: "for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness ... (and to the exiled people he says) nations shall see your vindication, and the kings, your glory... you shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of your God."

John's community lived under the cruel persecution of the Roman Empire and found saving grace of the resurrected Jesus to

be their assurance. They remembered the words of Isaiah: "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of your God."

The prologue, which summarizes the entire gospel of John, is a powerful testimony to the reality of the living Christ. It is a witness to the power of Christ. It is a joyous hymn sung by those whose own experience was decisively marked by the incarnation. It is not a theological speculation about the character of the incarnate Word. It is instead a testimony from those whose lives have been radically transformed.

I hear echoes, not of clergy colleagues, but of those members of this congregation who have spoken from this pulpit and have graciously shared their lives of transformation with us. Their eloquence, and the power of their witness, has moved us all to greater levels of giving and service. The incarnate Word is alive in them.

Herbert O'Driscoll, former Warden of the College of Preachers at the National Cathedral (now called the Cathedral College), offers these words on the incarnation:

"The divine has come into the human. God is present in human history...if we are to retain the capacity to live creatively within history, in spite of its terrors, we need the reassurance that comes from the knowledge that God shares in that history.

To believe in the awesome fact of the Incarnation is to believe that the author of the human play has stepped into the play and is an actor with us. The fact that, he did not chose a grandiose posturing, heroic past, but instead played his lines as a servant and peacemaker, and finally as a prisoner – makes his coming among us all the more wonderful and hopeful."

Incarnation is the place where hope contends with fear. Kathleen Norris, well-known contemporary spiritual writer puts it this way:

“When a place or a time seems touched by God, it is an overshadowing, a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans. But even in terrible circumstances and calamities, in matters of life and death, if I sense I am in the shadow of God, I find light; so much light that my vision improves dramatically. I know holiness is near.”

The Incarnation is the story of God’s relentless love – God’s scandalous grace – God’s persistent purposes.

An eleven year old boy with cancer lost all his hair as the result of chemotherapy. When it came time for him to return to school after a series of treatments, he decided, with the encouragement of his parents, to wear a baseball cap to try to hide his baldness. He went to school with much trepidation. He was afraid that his classmates would taunt him because, in his eyes, he looked so weird. But he was surprised. Much to his delight he discovered that all of his friends had shaved their heads, in solidarity with him.

We who have experienced the light of Christ are called by the greatness of the grace that has been given us, to make known, to the ends of the earth, the presence of the cosmic and living Christ. We are called not only to preach the glad tidings of his coming, but above all to reveal him in our own lives.

Along with the community of St. John, we proclaim the message of salvation not only by what we say but also how we live - and always with God’s help. So we become the incarnation of Christ in this sad and broken world, bringing hope and joy and

light, where darkness and despair has been before. Incarnation is written into the DNA of the universe.

I love Hymn number 82's ode to the Incarnation:

"Of the Father's love begotten,  
Ere the worlds began to be;  
He is Alpha and Omega;  
He the source, the ending be;  
Of the things that are, that have been,  
And the future years to see,  
Evermore and evermore."