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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Christmas Day
December 25, 2021

Lectionary Year C: John 1:1-14

The story of Christ's birth is comfortably familiar, with Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger, and with the angel appearing to the shepherds, telling them to go to Bethlehem to see what has taken place.

And then comes the Gospel of John...

The Christmas Day service, guided, of course, by our schedule of lectionary readings, has John, chapter 1 for a Gospel reading, and, as the Christmas Day service usually isn't well-attended, it can get by with a more obtuse, philosophical Gospel reading, while we use the more familiar Luke 2 Gospel on Christmas Eve, when we have a full church. To put the difference between the two in scientific terms, Luke 2 is high school physics, while John 1 is advanced quantum mechanics. But instead of stopping at the idea that the Gospel of John is obtuse and philosophical, let us look at it more as it unfolds as John the Evangelist intended it...as a revelation of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ,

And mystery, in this sense, is not of the "whodunnit" variety of popular fiction. We don't read the Gospel of John to the end to find out God's answers to the questions that the text raises. No, this is mystery in the sense of something that is partially re-

vealed and still mostly hidden. This is the sort of mystery that stirs within us sensations of awe and wonder, kind of like when you see stars in the sky whose light has taken thousands of light years to reach you. Of the four Gospels, the one that most clearly attempts to distill that into an orderly account of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is John.

Unfortunately, this tends to make a nice, concise, illustration-filled sermon on a text from John virtually impossible, with the first chapter of John (its "prologue," in particular) providing some of the biggest obstacles for the preacher. As an example, John begins in the abstract, with a mysterious discourse on this Being known as "the Word." But, as we know from developmental psychology, abstract concepts are among the last things that children, in particular, are able to grasp. And, unless you go off to college and graduate school to study philosophy or theology, your dealings with abstract concepts will be rather limited. Most of our world is "concrete," and we're not going to spend a lot of time contemplating truth, justice, and goodness, if we even have time for that sort of thing at all!

So, when John kicks off his Gospel with this meditation on "the Word," I find it very difficult to interpret for a lay audience (at least without incorporating some really bad analogies and examples). I would prefer instead to start with the obvious and then we can work our way into the deeper matters as they present themselves.

Starting with the obvious, the Word, according to John, is Jesus Christ. But notice that there's really no "birth narrative" for Jesus here, like we find in the Gospel of Luke. John instead seeks to show how Jesus, as the Word, has existed since the beginning of time (or before). The closest thing resembling "birth" would be the final verse of this morning's text: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1:14a). Jesus was born as a real human being, yet of the same substance as God the Father. In a sense, the abstract becomes concrete.

One way we might look at this is in terms of ideas and dreams becoming reality. In 1961, President Kennedy committed the United States to putting a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Neither is a man nor the moon an abstract concept, but until one sets foot on the other, it's still an idea or a dream. It's not concrete. Of course, it took an extraordinary investment of money and talent to accomplish that goal -- and we got it done by the end of the decade, with months to spare -- but when Neil Armstrong landed on the lunar surface on July 21st, 1969, the fruit of all that vision and investment was finally realized. The dream became reality.

I shall go out on a limb and offer a potentially dangerous analogy, so please bear with me. If we think of the primordial stuff of ideas and dreams -- of how they can float out there in the ether, never to become real without the right catalysts and circumstances -- we might think of them as being of a similar substance to God.

If it can be thought of, it can exist. But without a space program, the lunar landing would've never happened. Now, what if humankind were perfect? Would Christ's birth have happened? Probably not. God would've existed, but would've never been seen. As it turned out, though, humankind was far from perfect and needed a Savior. This Savior's work is summed up nicely by John in these words: "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" (John 1:12-13). Christ brings all who have been estranged from God by sin into a relationship with God that had not yet been envisioned.

But God envisioned it, and made it reality.

God envisioned a world saved from sin and sent his only Son to make that real. But much of how this happens remains a mystery, and rightly so, I think. If we believe in a God who is infinite and eternal, there has to be quite a bit of that which is infinite and eternal that we cannot possibly know. So the Word becomes flesh in a little burst into our reality, but then returns to heaven from earth and remains there until the living and the dead are to be judged. And even if the Word seems shrouded in abstraction, know that the Word-made-flesh is anything but abstract. He was born a real human being on Christmas Day, coming to Earth to save us from some very real problems.

That can't be too hard to grasp at all! Amen.