

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Christmas Day
December 25, 2020

Lectionary Year B: John 1:1-14

The Gospel of John tells the Christmas story in a way that many of us might not be accustomed to. There are no shepherds, there is no star over Bethlehem, and there is no manger. Rather, we get a very abstract, philosophical discourse on something called "the Word."

The point that John is trying to get across is that Jesus, as God's Son, has co-existed with the Father since the beginning of time. "What's the big deal about that?", you may ask. Well, theologians are mighty persnickety when it comes to matters of doctrine, and here, we theologians have a point to make about, in this case, the doctrine of the Trinity.

And we are looking for some support from the Scriptures...

Were it not for John's Gospel saying that Jesus coexisted with God the Father since the beginning of time, there would be no Scriptural basis for the Trinity's assertion that God the Father and God the Son are one in the same. Again, that is precisely what John is saying in these opening verses to his Gospel.

Confused? Then think about it this way: When you were conceived in the womb, you surely didn't look anything like you do today, but what came to be came from many of the same cells that were there at the beginning. And as time went on, you developed hands and feet and ears and a mouth and a nose and a heart...all of which are still with you today! That which was there at the beginning is the same as what you see right now.

And, similar to the way you existed in the womb, Jesus existed with God the Father

since the beginning of time. He couldn't be seen, but he was still there. But it was not until God the Father chose Mary that the birthing process of the Nativity began. God took that Word that was there from the beginning and put it in a Virgin's womb, and from that one event came both the Son of God and the Son of Man, fully human and yet fully divine, from God the Father and yet capable of dying on a cross.

Thus, the Gospel of John bids us to celebrate something known as the mystery of the Incarnation. Incarnation is nothing other than a fancy word for "in the flesh," which is precisely what John says in our text: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1:14a). He's talking about a real person, not some phantom or superman. And yet this real person was also capable of doing some infinitely extraordinary things, as our text says, "He gave [us] power to become children of God" (1:12b). Being a child of God means that, through Jesus, we live and die in a relationship with God that can never be broken, all thanks to the work of a God who, through the Word, decided to put that Word toward saving sinners like you and me.

Now, you've likely heard all this before, to the point that it has lost most of its punch. But when you look at our text from the Gospel of John, it isn't quite the old familiar language of "Christ saves sinners" that we cut our teeth on in Sunday School. Instead, John portrays it all as a genuine spiritual mystery, and by mystery I mean something that's partially hidden and yet still there. Can we possibly know everything about this Word? One gets the sense, especially from this text, that there will always be a veil of mystery over what God reveals to his children. And we really can't do anything about that apart from getting used to it, because we can't know absolutely everything about God!

But as Christians, we are all participants in this great mystery -- the mystery of

the Word becoming flesh and living among us -- and this is something that can be neither explained away through science nor debunked by reason. Yet, in many cases, Christians have approached their religion in a way that is grossly un-mysterious and devoid of awe, majesty, or splendor. Looking back on my decades as a Lutheran, I recall that, at its worst, Lutheranism was a dry, intellectual, exercise and worship, in particular, plodded along with all the awe, majesty, and splendor of a board of directors' meeting. (At its best, though, the worship could rival that of the most gifted Episcopalians.) But whether Lutheran or Episcopal, my personal passion for the Church's worship through the sacred liturgy is, in a big way, a welcome correction to the way things had been done in my past. The liturgy, as an expression of the Incarnation, bridges the earthly and heavenly realms and invites us into something that is genuinely transcendent, mysterious, and spiritual.

Certainly, the Christmas of popular culture has given us examples of mystery playing a greater role. One of the most familiar examples is that of Santa Claus. As kids, a few of us might've wondered how a jolly inhabitant of the North Pole and his eight reindeer delivered Christmas presents to all the boys and girls around the world -- and did it all before daybreak, December 25th. Well, it was usually presented to the little ones something like this: "We don't know, but it happens anyway."

In other words, it was a mystery.

So if it's okay to have mystery in secular phenomena like Santa Claus, why can't we have mystery in the sacred? To me, that's where it belongs. We owe God not only respect but also reverence as we enter into his holy house, because there is so much that he has offered to us, and respect and reverence is the least that we can offer back to him!

Think again, too, of the awe with which children approach the popular Christmas story, where for them there really is a magic that happens when one wakes on Christmas morning to find something from Santa in their stockings. Now, apply that same awe to the real Christmas story -- the one where the Word becomes flesh and lives among us. Is that not all the more mysterious?

I should certainly hope so!

And yes, maybe John's version of the Christmas story doesn't include those quaint elements like a manger and shepherds and a model-perfect mother and infant...but the effect of it all is still the same. Jesus Christ -- the Word made flesh -- came into the world to save sinners. And that is a most awe-inspiring mystery.

To use John's language once again, the Christ who was born came forth from the eternal Word of our heavenly Father. He is the One who has existed with God the Father since the beginning of time, and who now reigns forever at God's right hand...the same God, the same man, all from the same substance.

The Word.

May that Word dwell in you, and may you see his glory...the glory of grace and truth revealed to us and yet shrouded in mystery.

Amen.