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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
First Sunday after Christmas
December 27, 2020

Lectionary Year B: John 1:1-18

For those that heard the Gospel reading and sermon on Christmas Day, this morning's text -- but hopefully not sermon -- may seem rather redundant. The portion of John's Gospel that gets the most attention at Christmas, Chapter One, is known as the prologue, and, as I've noted elsewhere, it establishes much of the theological groundwork for the person and nature of Christ, along with Christ's relationship to God the Father. Today's sermon will, with God's help, be my best effort at not repeating what you heard on Christmas Day; thankfully, this morning's text includes an extra four verses at the end, which may help in that effort...

Certainly, John's Gospel is not the easiest to interpret, especially if one is not accustomed to thinking in abstract concepts. If one asks the question, "What is the Word?", a theologian, for example, could legitimately answer, "The Word is." Then, the theologian might launch into paragraphs of Clinton-esque discourse on the meaning of the word "is." Be assured that I will put you through nothing of the sort this morning; rather, I shall focus on the good and wondrous things we can find here, without resorting to complex theological jargon.

Now, though, I'd like us to take a step outside of the theological and biblical realm for a moment and attempt to compare Christ's coming to Earth with something almost as revolutionary from more modern times. Naturally, my interest in transportation gives me some examples to draw from, so let's go back to the nineteenth century and the advent of the steam locomotive. Prior to the steam locomotive, the fastest that most humans had ever traveled was about fifteen miles per hour, and that was with the assistance of a horse...and perhaps they went a little fast-

er if the horse got into a good gallop. Given the fact that this had been the norm -- not for centuries, but for millennia -- people became very afraid when machines started replacing horses and everything was suddenly moving much faster. And this is understandable, because if you were used to going about fifteen miles per hour forever, the thought of going sixty -- four times as fast -- would be downright frightening. At sixty miles per hour, would we all explode? I don't know if people's speculations ever got that far out, but it was once thought that women, in particular, couldn't possibly travel so fast because their uterus would fly out of their bodies. Were that true, I can't imagine what happens when a woman breaks the sound barrier in, say, a supersonic fighter jet...

Often, for something (or someone) to be revolutionary, there must be an absolute shattering of a previous paradigm. As was the case with the locomotive, few, if any, ever expected humans to travel much faster than about fifteen miles per hour. Of course, that was blown out of the water and then, in the twentieth century, people in the air and on land and sea pushed those limits more and more until speed records were shattered and, eventually, we made it into outer space.

When revolutions occur, though, there are people who either embrace them or, as mentioned, become frightened by them. When the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, a sixty-mile-an-hour train came roaring through Roman-occupied Israel and upset a lot of people, many with a vested interest in maintaining the fifteen-mile-per-hour status quo, so to speak. Remember how John put it in today's Gospel: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (1:11). The religious authorities of Jesus' time did not look favorably upon this fellow from Nazareth who was breaking a lot of rules. But one could argue that the religious authorities were being short-sighted when considering the effect of this rule breaker's work; our text notes further, "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" (1:12-13). God makes us his children in Jesus Christ, apart from anything that we do to get noticed by him. It was that sort of revolutionary stuff that folks like the scribes and the Pharisees couldn't accept. And we all know what happened to Jesus because of this!

John's Gospel doesn't use language of "revolution," however; instead, the distinction we find is between law and grace. (We may want to part with our horse and locomotive examples at this time.) Our text states: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). Please, however, do not conclude that such a statement means that, all of a sudden, the new "good stuff" replaced the old "bad stuff." Rather, it is more appropriate to conclude that the way humans interact with God has changed. Under the law, certain rituals and sacrifices were necessary to indicate to God that one was an obedient member of the Jewish faith. Under grace in Jesus Christ, such rituals and sacrifices were no longer necessary because Christ is now the once-and-for-all sacrifice who redeems everyone, whether Jew or Gentile. Hopefully, these concepts can live side-by-side and not be an occasion for disparaging the Old Testament, or engaging in a triumphalistic celebration of Christianity's superiority over Judaism, or, worst of all, committing acts of blatant anti-Semitism.

I would urge a more cautious understanding of matters here. You're undoubtedly familiar with the phrase, "There but by the grace of God go I." In a similar vein, we understand grace as a very precious and unusual exception to the rules, and, therefore, it is not an occasion for cockiness or arrogance. Without God's grace, our destiny would be that of damnation, but thankfully, our God is merciful and grants humanity a much better destiny by sending Jesus Christ to make us his

children and heirs to his kingdom. How abundant is that grace? To answer that question, I would refer you to John's Gospel again, where it is written, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (1:16). The Word -- Jesus Christ -- is with us continuously, revealed and proclaimed, and never ceases to pour grace upon grace upon us. Thankfully, we, too, have means or channels of this grace, whereby it comes to us in flesh-and-blood form -- in worship, through the proclamation of the Word by lectors and preachers and through the Holy Eucharist, the latter of which is believed by us to be the Body and Blood of Christ. What better way could there be for forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation to come to us than by the very same means it came to humanity two millennia ago?

And, of course, this grace is grounded in the cross and resurrection of Christ; the cross fulfilled the law's requirement of sacrifice once and for all, and the resurrection opened the door to eternal life for us. If one were to take away these cornerstones of the Christian faith, there would be no grace for all, and because many would remain in sin, condemnation would be their more likely fate. Think about the last time you were forgiven. How did it feel? What sort of release and relief did it bring you? Now, take that and multiply it by infinity. That's what grace feels like and is...when it comes from God. You are released from sin and relieved of the obligations of the law. From there, you are free to live as a child of God -- to do good things out of the goodness of your own heart, and not out of some dreaded obligation.

One could view this season of Christmas as an ushering in of this revolutionary grace of God that continually sustains us and transforms the hearts and minds of many. Therefore, the greatest Christmas gift of all is what God did -- and continues to do -- for us in Jesus Christ. History can prove that humanity couldn't continue in its old ways, and God found a way to get through to humanity, by doing something not only revolutionary but also salvific. At the right time, he sent

his Son -- the Word who had been with him since the beginning of time -- to save the world from something that could've been an eternally unhealthy pattern, to say the least! Sometimes, we save ourselves from little mistakes or misconceptions, like that one where some of us thought that bizarre and terrible things could happen if we traveled at sixty miles per hour. But while it is possible to save ourselves from such mistakes and misconceptions, it is not possible to save ourselves from sin. Indeed, when that connection between God and humanity is broken, there is only one way to mend it -- through Jesus Christ. From him comes a precious and unusual exception to the rules, and one that is completely unmerited, which surely helps make it the greatest Christmas gift of all.

Amen.