

Sermon—Christmas Day—2016
The “Other” Christmas Story
John 1: 1-18

Today’s Gospel brings us the “other” Christmas story. It does not give us the visual images of Luke’s story with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, the animals, and of course the Baby Jesus. Instead, the Christmas story told from John’s perspective causes us to reflect on the MEANING of Christmas. John’s approach to Christmas reflects his intention to proclaim its meaning not just to Jews, but also to the entire world. From John’s vantage point, his world was dominated by Greek thought.

Thus John employs a technical Greek philosophical term called the “Word” to proclaim Jesus. At the same time, the term “Word” was not strange to Jews. In fact, speaking of God as the “Word” is a consistent idea in the Jewish scriptures which we know as the Old Testament. In the first century, both Jews and Greeks found meaning in speaking of the “Word”. The Jews saw the “Word of God” as God Himself acting powerfully and effectively in creation. For instance, Psalm 33:6 says,

“By the WORD of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their hosts by the breath of His mouth.”

This is the ministry of God the Father.

In addition to underscoring God’s creative function, the Word of God was also seen as God’s vehicle of our redemption from sin, sickness, and death. For instance, Psalm 107:20 says,

“He sent forth His WORD, and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.”

This parallels the ministry of Jesus, God the Son.

Finally, the Jews could see the Word of God active in fulfilling His purpose for us. Isaiah 55:11 prophesies these words.

“So shall my WORD” be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

This is Isaiah’s way of describing the ministry of God the Holy Spirit.

Unlike our culture which limits the understanding of “Word” to grouped letters on a page or perhaps a personal pledge of one’s trustfulness, the Jews saw the Word of God acting to accomplish some end or purpose. Thus when John began his gospel with the simple, but profound introduction, “In the beginning was the Word,” (John 1:1), his Jewish readers understood that he was speaking of the creative action of God. As Genesis tells us, God spoke creation into being with His first recorded words, “Let there be light.”(Genesis 1:3)

John’s Greek readers, who represented a significant portion of the non-Jewish world, would have a similar idea of the Word’s creative action. Greek philosophy employed the term “Word” as the shaping, ordering, directing principle of the universe.

At the same time, there were indications that the Word meant more than a philosophical principle to the Greeks. There were times when Jews and Greeks were quite similar in using the term “Word” as the personification of wisdom. Greek philosophers spoke of the Word in a personal way as “the captain and pilot of the universe.” A Jewish-Greek philosopher named Philo even spoke of the Word of wisdom as “the Father’s eldest son.”

In the Book of Proverbs (8:30-31), the Word of God is described as Wisdom who was with God in the beginning, who stood beside God “like a master workman” who was “(God’s) daily delight, rejoicing before Him always...and delighting in the sons of men.”

All of these associations came to people’s minds when John spoke of the “Word” being with God in the beginning.

However, John was a good Jew and he could not compromise the oneness of God. The creed of Judaism is the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4.

“The Lord our God is ONE Lord.”

Thus John affirms very quickly in today’s Gospel, “The WORD WAS GOD.” (John 1:1)

The point is that while the Word could be personified as Wisdom who could delight in God’s accomplishments, the Word is primarily the creative expression of God’s personality, an integral equation with God’s being. Thus John could say,

“All things were made through Him and without Him was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:3)

However, John makes a significant departure from both Jewish and Greek thought when he begins to tell the Christmas story using the familiar terminology of the Word, but adding one earthshaking sentence which scandalized both Jews and Greeks.

“And the Word became FLESH and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

They were scandalized because Jews affirmed the uncompromising transcendence of God and Greeks saw the flesh as the repository of evil.

While the first verse of today’s Gospel affirms Jesus’ divinity while calling Him the Word, John also makes it clear that Jesus the Word became a human being. Jesus didn’t just appear to be a human being as some of John’s contemporaries were saying. Jesus became flesh. John deliberately chose this word “flesh” instead of saying, “He became a man,” or “He became a body.” Why?--because “flesh” stands for the whole person. It refers to human existence with all its frailty and vulnerability. Jesus identified with us to that degree. Jesus made our creaturely weakness His very own form of being. This is the essential message of the Incarnation of God.

C.S. Lewis speaks of the Incarnation of God as the “Grand Miracle.” Next to bringing creation into being from nothing, the Incarnation ranks as the most significant miracle God ever accomplished.

What does God becoming flesh mean for your life and mine?

First, the Incarnation was God’s means of accomplishing our salvation. St. Anselm, an 11th century theologian had a remarkable insight into the relationship between the Incarnation and our salvation from sin and death. He said that that our sin and “fallenness” makes it impossible for us to save ourselves. Only God can save us. The fact is, however, that the repairing of our relationship with God must come from our side—from within our human life. Why?—because that is where our sins are committed. St. Anselm says in his written work, “Why God Became Man”,

“Since no one, save God, can make satisfaction for our sins, and no one, save man, ought to make it, it is necessary for a God-man to make it,”

The coming of Jesus as God-man does not save us in itself. The DEATH of the God-man is also required. However, the Incarnation establishes the necessary pre-condition for the saving death of Jesus Christ. Jesus had to become human in order to die. That is why the manger and the cross are so closely related.

In addition to our salvation, the “enfleshment” of God is a supreme affirmation of the value of our existence.

As one of my commentators said,

“For all our sins and ‘fallen-ness’, ‘He abhors not the virgin’s womb.’ Our human life truly was the vehicle for God’s life, our flesh contained the Word, our humanity was home for Him who is forever.” (Bruce Milne, “The Message of John”)

The Word becoming flesh demonstrates the sympathetic presence of God sharing our human struggle with us. There is no other parallel in any other world religion to the Christian understanding of the Incarnation. Only the Christian gospel stresses that God fully became one of us while remaining fully God.

The greatness of this truth stretches our perception of God’s actions beyond the limits of our human understanding. It staggers our imagination, yet it also drives us to our knees in worship. No wonder we sing in that hymn “O Come All Ye Faithful”, “O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.” Christmas can only be understood as a wonder.

On Christmas Eve, we entered into that wonder. This morning, like Mary, we ponder it in our hearts.

John had sixty plus years to ponder that wonder and he was able to re-describe it in terms that spoke to his day and ours. When we reflect on Jesus the Word, it takes us deeper into the mystery of Christmas—a mystery which is far more than a challenging puzzle. The mystery of Jesus’ coming to be with us is a gift which we are invited to receive daily.

The last words of the Gospel of Matthew reveal Jesus’ daily gift of Himself to you and me when it quotes Jesus as saying,

“I am with you always to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

Christmas is a mystery which takes us into the very heart of God. There we partake of God’s outpoured love for us which motivated Him to lay down His life for us so that we might live with God forever.