

The First Sunday after Christmas, December 31, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. John 1:1-18

For the rest of the world, today is New Year's Eve – and, of course, it's exactly that! For us, though, it's that and more. For those who are not Christians, Christmas is a distant memory. The focus for more than a few will be resolutions – eat better, lose weight, be more intentional about a whole host of things, like actually taking time off, getting that book finished, writing that dissertation, cutting down that dangerously-leaning tree..... All the ordinary challenges and mundane activities that all too often feel more like a daily grind than daily life are reimposing themselves.

For us, here, today, we're still celebrating! And with the opening verses of John's gospel we're diving deep into The Narrative (capital "T," capital "N") story that begins and begins again the story of our faith and of ourselves.

What we have today is a prologue – a mystical, powerful statement that will define and contextualize everything that follows in John's Gospel. Rather like the first two chapters of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, this Prologue is John's birth story of Jesus.

In the majesty and the mystery there's so much here in these first eighteen verses that tell us the meaning of the Christmas event! There's barely time to scratch the surface – whole books have been written on these eighteen verses!

Part of the reason is this: if you don't understand the prologue, the rest of John's gospel loses a lot of its power! So here are some very brief reflections on what these magnificent eighteen verses are saying about Christmas.

"In the beginning...." – sound familiar? That's how Genesis begins, and that opening chapter of Genesis is about – what? The creation. Not "a" creation, but "The" creation - the one-and-only creation. Here, in the opening verses of John's gospel, we're told that God has chosen to recreate God's very self in Jesus. John is telling us "this is the origin of Jesus, this is the sort of relationship he has with God, in fact, here's his identity as God: This is who Jesus is, for us." Through these three categories of origin, relationship, and identity we make sense of our own humanity – this is who we are. Now, in Jesus, God lives these truths. So in these opening four verses we're being offered an image of Christmas as the rebirth of God

That connection with Genesis continues with verse five – the light shining in the darkness that the darkness can't overcome. Actually that word "overcome" means more like "a failure to comprehend, an inability to understand," than some sort of physical assault. In the darkest part of the year, Christmas is for us the birth of comprehension, the gift of understanding that's beyond the ability of the rest of the world to grasp unless they open themselves to the story of God.

The introduction of John the Baptist is a little jarring, considering we've just been hearing a cosmic birth story – but actually it's making an important point. The other three gospels do the same thing: Mark right away in the first chapter, and Matthew and Luke after their prologues. In

the context of our celebration of Christmas today, John's presence is reminding us that a critical response to Christmas is witness. Christmas doesn't end when the decorations come down and the trees end up in recycling – rather, Christmas is just getting started, because Christmas witnesses to the light that is Jesus, and reminding us that we're called upon to do the same. No sitting quietly and waiting for instructions: these *are* the instructions!

The prologue continues with a reminder: just as Jesus is a child of God, so are we! In a sense, the promise of Christmas is that it puts us in the manger with Jesus. Anyone who has had anything to do with a newborn child knows just how much that child depends on his or her parents – the answer is “totally” (of course)! In exactly the same way, John says, we depend on God *and* we can rely on God to be there for us. Christmas reminds us both of that reality for us as people of faith, and also of the many ways we fail to embrace that reality, that we fail to trust in God.

Verse 14 – “and the Word became flesh and lived among us.....full of grace and truth” really states most clearly the theological claim John is making in this introduction; he's connecting the “primordial Word” – the Word that was in the beginning with God, that was a partner with God in creating all that is, that *is* God – this Word has now become human – as the contemporary creed puts it, Jesus “became truly human” – not some reflection of being human, not something that looked but wasn't human – the Word became fully, truly, completely human.

One of the most powerful statements here is not overtly stated, but implied: that by speaking of the Word – Jesus – we're also being told who God is, what God is about, and to what and whom God is committed. The Old Testament promise that God will be with God's people wherever they go has been re-presented in Jesus. It's a much more personal claim – deeply intimate – and it assumes God's commitment to and continuity with God's people – with us. *In the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, now God not only goes where God's people go, but is who they are – who we are.* Christmas is the word becoming flesh.

The Word became flesh.....full of grace and truth. That word – “grace” – only appears four times in John's gospel, and all four are in this passage. Once the Word becomes flesh, once that fullness of grace is embodied in Jesus, the gospel assumes that grace is then made present, real – incarnated – “in the rest of the gospel [which will show us] what grace looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like, feels like.” (Karoline Lewis). Christmas, John tells us, is grace upon grace.

And so the prologue draws to a close, with a ‘book-end’ repetition of how it began: “*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*” Here, again, is who Jesus is, what his relationship with God is like, where he comes from. For John's community, familiar with the Old Testament's vision of God as the One who will be with them, this understanding of Jesus as God revealing God's self is both new and profoundly different. There's extraordinary tenderness in the original Greek which we miss because the translators simply couldn't bring themselves to use the actual Greek word – breast – and chose “heart” instead. What we lose in that translation is a feminine vision of Jesus' relationship with the Divine that uses the imagery of a child feeding at his mother's breast – an image entirely appropriate considering this is John's birth story about Jesus.

That's unfortunate – as I said. We know that a newborn is totally dependent on his or her parents and especially her or his mother – what better way to sum it up than with the image of the nursing of a child?! Everything we need for life, right here and right now, God will give, over and over again. To be a child of God will ring false if we sever that metaphor from the very literal reality of what it actually means to be a child.

And - again - this is not simply and only about how we understand Jesus. “At stake in this image is not only who Jesus is as the Word made flesh, as the unique and one and only God, but who we are as believers [and how we relate to Jesus, to God].” (Lewis). For you and for me – for all of us – the metaphor says that this deeply intimate, personal, profound bond and relationship between Jesus and God is the same bond and relationship open to us.

That's the whole gospel – and especially the whole Christmas message – in just eighteen verses! Christmas is the rebirth of God, the light shining in the darkness; Christmas reminds us that we are that light's witnesses to a world living in darkness, because at Christmas the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, embodying the possibility for us of an intimate relationship with God while reminding us of the true nature of our dependence on God: joy of joys, grace on grace: unto us has been born a savior, Christ the Lord! Come let us adore him!

I am indebted to Prof. Karoline Lewis for her exegesis of this passage, on which this sermon is based. Nigel Taber-Hamilton