

CHRISTMAS DAY MESSAGE

JOHN 1:1-14

DECEMBER 25, 2019

“A NATIVITY STORY”

If you attended church yesterday, you know that Christmas Eve worship concerns itself with a baby and a manger and a little out of the way town of about 150 people called Bethlehem. The Christmas stories of Luke and Matthew tell with earthy imagery the fulfillment of an eight-century old promise the prophet Isaiah made that “Immanuel” – a Hebrew word which means God with us. In the gospel of John, that Hebrew word is expanded upon and expressed with a Greek one – “agapesen” – which means God loves us.

The Christmas stories of Christmas Eve relay the theology of the church of a humbled God – divinity sequestered in a human body subjected to every conceivable human restriction and vulnerability. Philippians 2:6-7 expresses this mystery better than any passage of the Bible when it says Jesus Christ “*being in very nature God...made himself nothing...being found in human likeness.*” But the Christmas story of Christmas Day – John 1:1-14, comes at things a bit differently. The most obvious difference is no baby and no Bethlehem. You couldn’t build much of a Sunday school pageant out of this reading if you tried.

John is talking about the incarnation of Jesus – he says “*the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*” But John’s ultimate concern is not on the child Jesus but those who, through Jesus, “*have the right to become children of God.*” All who believe - defined in John as all who receive him as Savior and Lord, are such children. The nativity that matters to John in other words - is yours! And amazingly, John says, your conception as a child of God happens pretty much as it did for Jesus. Luke 1:35 says Mary was told “*that the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*” Matthew 1:20 tells us that Mary’s husband Joseph was told “*what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*”

John 1:13 says if you believe in the name of God’s son Jesus, if you have therefore “received him”, you are someone who is “*born of God.*” I know it’s awfully early in the morning to contend with ideas like this – particularly if you were here for the 10:00 PM service last night, but what John says in our lesson is that the power that put Jesus in Mary’s womb has put Jesus in your heart. Verse 14 again – “*the word...made his dwelling among us.*” The Christmas Eve stories of Christmas are about God inhabiting a human body. The Christmas Day story of Christmas is devoted to God inhabiting, by grace through faith – you.

We tend to think that the beginning of John’s gospel – sometimes referred to as his “prologue” is speaking not about individuals but all creation – the entire cosmos. This passage is sometimes referred to as the creation story according to John – a Genesis 1 and 2 redux. That’s natural because the opening verses speak of Jesus as the Word “*through which all things were made*” while John 1:10 says “*though the world was made through him the world did not recognize him.*”

But John's gospel is thoroughly personal – far less “historical” than the others, and John's use of the word “world”, commonly thought of as the earth and all its people, is just as often, if not most especially about you and your world. The personal nature of salvation saturates the entire gospel of John. It is most famously stated in John 3:16 - *“for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* It's your birth as a child of God and your salvation through God's child that matters to John.

No one has apprehended this better than the great hymn writer Charles Wesley in his great Christmas hymn *“Hark the Herald Angels Sing”*. The theology of John 1:1-14 is everywhere in this magnificent anthem – *“God and sinners reconciled”* speaks of the Savior who *“came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”* *“Light and life to all he brings”* is inspired from John 1:4's poetic statement that *“In him was life, and that life was the light of all people.”*

The crescendo of Wesley's great hymn of faith is based on John 3:16's great statement of the faith – Christ, Wesley gushes, was *“born to raise each child of earth – born to give them second birth.”* Poet Kathleen Norris, pondering the Nativity of our Lord through the lens of John's gospel wrote *“on this day, the full dimension of our relationship with God is revealed and we become, through Christ, God's children. Because God took on human flesh, human flesh is made holy. Even lowly and dusty feet, if they carry God's message, are (Isaiah 52:7) says, ‘beautiful feet that bring good news’.”*

In all the Christmas stories – Matthew, Luke and John, one thing is quite clear – sinful, conflicted, human lives don't deter God in the least – in fact they tend to garner his considerable attention. The humblest things are according to all the Christmas stories, are the most exalted. The Nativity of our Lord is both mystery and miracle - two miracles in fact. The first - that God would become human, is remarkable but by no means the greatest. The greater is that God became human because he loves and wants to spend eternity with a human like you. “Immanuel – God with us”, and it's Gospel of John equivalent “Agapesen” – “God loves us.”

The Nativity that matters to John is yours. Jesus' birth, the maker and keeper of the stars born in a manger under a twinkling one, would be of little note to the history books and of little consequence to heaven and earth, if it hadn't led or doesn't lead to your birth as a child of God through faith. But it did, and it can, and that's a herald that isn't just for angels to sing – no, especially not today.
AMEN