

## The Wonder of Christmas

For many of us, this ninth day of Christmas comes with conflicting emotions. Much as we might like it to be the joyful culmination of our end of the year celebration, the truth of the matter is it's also a welcome end to a lot of hassle. There's a certain relief to being able to settle back into a routine: no more too-late party nights, no more too-rich food and drink. The kids will be back to school, so no more scrambling for special day care or using up PTO or reallocating use of vehicles. Family and guests, beloved as they are, have, to our somewhat abashed relief, gone home. For those who've already gone back to work, we no longer have to deal with the minor aggravation of those who flaunted their freedom throughout the two holiday weeks. Things are back to normal.

But lest I sound like too much of a curmudgeon, I want to encourage a pause this morning in the rush to the "return to normalcy," as the late and little-lamented Warren Gamaliel Harding put it. For the next few minutes, let's shift from the anticipation of business as usual to a look back at the wonder of Christmas. We may be ambivalent about "the most wonderful time of the year" by this ultimate day of the holidays but we should never lose sight of the true wonder: what the world has just taken the time to commemorate, at least ostensibly, is a miracle beyond our capacity to fully understand – that in order to truly fulfill the promises revealed by the prophets, in order to realize the visions of the seers, the Creator of All Things became incarnate in an ordinary man, God proving God's love for Creation by becoming a creature and joining humankind in our daily struggle, making holy what we perceived as common and gross, and opening the door to all of us to become the blessings to the earth and to each other that God created us to be in the first place.

The four men whose tales of the life of Jesus of Nazareth became universally used by Christians as "the Gospels" struggled with how to adequately portray this idea that in Jesus God had revealed the truest part of God's self. Mark began his "Jesus Tale" with the carpenter's baptism in the River Jordan by the prophet John. In Mark's understanding, it seems, that was when the Holy Spirit of God came to rest on Jesus, imbuing him with the divine attributes that inspired even the Roman centurion in charge of his execution to affirm that he was truly God's Son. Matthew and Luke, writing later, were moved to assert that Jesus had been one with the Holy Spirit since the very beginning spark started his life as a fertilized egg in a peasant girl's womb, although in their first century understanding of procreation, they wouldn't have put it that way. The Gospel According to John takes the story of Jesus the Messiah back even further: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

This notion of creative power of God being expressed as word or voice was ancient, established as one of the first ideas in the Torah: "Then God *said*, "Let there be light"; and there was light." As the worshippers of the God of Israel became a part of the widespread empires of those whose language and culture was Greek, they began to try to express this notion in a way that would be understandable and attractive to their neighbors and even to their fellow Jews whose thought was so heavily influenced by the Hellenes. The utterances of God which had created all things were called God's Wisdom. This morning, we join the majority of Christians around the world, who more freely use the books that Protestants relegated to sub-scriptural status in the Apocrypha, in reading a passage from the writings of Sirach, a scholar and teacher in the Hellenistic period:

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“Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist... Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. (God) said, Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.”

And so it was that John the Evangelist came to write of the Word who was God dwelling with, literally “pitching his tent with,” us, everyday people, and of us, the least, the poorest, the most despised nation on earth. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

The implications of this incarnation are enormous. If Almighty God thinks so highly of this impoverished, occupied, contentious people as to show love to them to the extent of becoming one of them, how then should we respond to the least among us? Or to any of our neighbors? Should we not also enter into their situations, through empathetic listening and action? And what does this mean to our self-images? Can we not see that we, too, are the beloved of God? Are we not valuable, along with the rest of creation? We must care for ourselves, our neighbors, our world, because God loves us all so much. Truly, this is part of the wonder of Christmas.

There’s a story that I first heard on television and that some of my friends in the recovery community have told me is often used in that context that I think beautifully illustrates God’s love for us as revealed in the Incarnation. I heard this story as related to the character Josh Lyman on “The West Wing” by the character Leo McGarry: “This guy’s walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can’t get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, ‘Hey you. Can you help me out?’ The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, ‘Father, I’m down in this hole; can you help me out?’ The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by, ‘Hey, Joe, it’s me; can you help me out?’ And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, ‘Are you stupid? Now we’re both down here.’ The friend says, ‘Yeah, but I’ve been down here before and I know the way out.’” That’s the story as Leo told it to Josh. But I think it has a great deal in common with the wonder of Christmas. Because of God’s great love for us, God has jumped into the hole with us. And because God has been a human being like us, has been tempted like us, has been lonely and cold and sad like us, God can say to us, “I’ve been down here before and I know the way out.”

When we stumble, when we fall, when we sin against ourselves or others or God, the message of Christmas continues to be a wonderful one, for we have, in that babe of Bethlehem, the man who was and is the savior of the world. John wrote, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” Again, John was following the lead of another writer (and again one sadly neglected in our tradition). In The Wisdom of Solomon, another collection of writings from a Jewish teacher of the Greek-era, we find a description of the Wisdom of God as the savior of God’s people: “A holy people and blameless race wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors. She entered the soul of a servant of the Lord, and withstood dread kings with wonders and signs. She gave to holy people the reward of their labors; she guided them along a marvelous way, and became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the night. She

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brought them over the Red Sea, and led them through deep waters..." Although that writer had Moses in mind, John bore witness that Jesus, too, was a deliverer who stood unafraid in the presence of "dread kings" and oppressors and who is still a shelter to us by day and our guide in the dark times of life.

And, as John wrote, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Or, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the (good news) of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory." The grace taught by Jesus, the undeserved gift to us of love from God, is the truth that sets us free to receive not only that love but the abundant life that goes with it, both now and eternally. Marked by the Spirit, we are the redeemed, God's own people, who can now praise God's glory by letting the glory of our light shine, living with the justice, mercy, and humility that comprise a life pleasing to God and showing others the way to do the same.

In that same passage of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes of the way in which our relationship with Christ Jesus has brought us not only redemption and forgiveness of our trespasses but also adoption as children of God. This, writes Paul, is God's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." It is a reminder that in the incarnation, not only did God descend to earth, becoming not only "God with us" but "God who is one of us," but also that in that miraculous and wondrous act, God elevated us along with all creation. It is God's freely given gift, making all of us realize we are worthy of God's love and, of course, of each other's love. It is not just the soon-to-be-discarded twinkling lights of Christmas that should make us appear lovable in each other's eyes, but the reality that we are made spiritually beautiful by God's grace.

This reality leads me back to the party atmosphere of Christmas, our society's sometimes corrupt celebration cleansed and beautified by what we have claimed all along to be the cause of our rejoicing: God's act of incarnation in Bethlehem. We should celebrate with a party! Jesus often told stories of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, as being like a party; specifically like the days-long party thrown for weddings in his native Galilee. Surprisingly enough, that image also appears in today's lectionary readings in a passage from that old grump, Jeremiah. In a vision of the life to come for God's redeemed, he writes, "They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry."

My sisters and my brothers, the day foreseen by Jeremiah has dawned. We are the redeemed and along with our duties to our neighbors and to God comes the encouragement to be merry. So, "Merry Christmas," for one last Sunday in this liturgical year. We will sing a song of joy together and then we will join for our symbolic reminder that the Wedding Banquet of the Son of God has begun. We understand that life will intervene, that there will be sorrows and strife and that not all of our families or friends or neighbors have yet learned that the true celebration is here. We understand that we have work to do in continuing the creative work of God in this life.

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But in a scrap of bread and a sip of juice, we do proclaim the Lord's coming, a coming filled with mercy and love and with all the good things that our hearts truly crave. Christ has come, hallelujah! Christ is coming, hallelujah! Merry Christmas! Amen.