

Sermon Christmas I 2017 Year B

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 147

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

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Here we are on day seven of the twelve days of Christmas. Our journey began with the familiar Christmas Eve story from Luke 's gospel of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in the manger surrounded by oxen, sheep, shepherds, and angels. We are in the middle of this 12 day season that reaches its conclusion next Saturday on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, detailing parts of the Christmas story from Matthew's gospel. Then the wise persons from the East will arrive bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Luke and Matthew focus on the earthly origins of Jesus, though the facts are open to discussion and question. Yet, the facts were never of primary importance.

Frederick Buechner has observed that "the Gospel writers are not really interested in the facts of the birth but in the significance, the meaning for them of that birth just as the people who love us are not really interested primarily in the facts of our births but in what it meant to them when we were born and how for them the world was never the same again..." (Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, [New York: Seabury, 1969], p. 53).

We just heard some of the most glorious poetry in scripture, the Christ hymn that begins the prologue of the Gospel of John. Written a decade or so after Luke and Matthew, John's approach is poetic rather than narrative.

John's gospel takes flight with, "In the beginning..." This familiar phrase is meant to echo the opening of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Genesis story of

creation. John wants us to know that what is happening is linked, indeed is intimately connected to events that preceded the creation. What is taking place is another chapter in an eternal drama. An unfolding drama with one of the most significant plot twists ever envisioned. God himself enters human history in a profound and intimate way. “And the Word became flesh and lived (dwelt) among us...”

With language so refined, we may miss some of the intimacy of what John is saying. The phrase “lived among us” or in some translations “dwelt among us” literally translates “pitches his tent” with us. There is no more intimate experience of living together than camping. That is how John describes Jesus and his living among us, as Jesus pitching his tent and camping with us. Jesus, (the Son of God), was exposed to the elements and hardships right alongside us. There were no safe havens for Jesus. Jesus was God on the ground with us. Jesus lived into his name, Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Grace and truth have come to us through Jesus. No one has ever seen God; however, those who are disciples have seen the only Son, the one who became what we are, and yet forever remains “close to the Father’s heart” (v. 18). Through the Incarnation, Jesus became one of us so that we could see, hear, and touch the living Word of God and partake of the Divine fullness.

The major Christological beliefs of Christianity are found in this Prologue. Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God who shares in the divinity of God, while at the same time taking on the fullness of our humanity. This is the mystery of the Incarnation: the eternal Word taking on full human nature – a genuine enfleshment who could experience feeling and need, and who could be crucified and killed. (Synthesis, p. 1, December 31, 2017). Jesus is the only one who has seen God; thus, through his life, we are enabled to see God’s love for the world.

In poetic imagery, we learn that what has come into being in Jesus is life, and the life was the light of all people. Jesus exists in each of us as the light that casts out darkness. We heard it predicted by the prophet Isaiah in the familiar passage on Christmas Eve. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” (Is. 9:2)

With the mention of light and darkness our memories are stirred as we recall the creation narrative in Genesis that also begins with the phrase, “In the beginning.” As God spoke creation into being, the first act in creation was God’s command, “let there be light.” From the beginning of creation and continuing through time is God’s ongoing work of bringing light into darkness.

This time of year, we naturally are aware of the contrast between dark and light. Days are shorter, making us long for the light and allowing us to note the slowly lengthening days with gratitude.

All of us live with darkness to a certain extent. The darkness is distinct for each of us and changes over time. Darkness is something we live with. Around us always.

What is this darkness in our lives? In the midst of joy there is always loss and sorrow. Not just for those who have lost loved ones at this time of year. But for all of us. In the midst of life we are in death as the Rite I funeral service acknowledges.

For others, mental illness is frequently described as darkness. Still others are facing difficult diagnoses to address or adapt to. Then there is the darkness of job loss. Or the loss of a friend or a move. Darkness can take many forms. Some struggle with darkness more than others.

There is the darkness of evil that surrounds us and impacts us. But there is darkness that haunts each of us as well. This is the darkness of those little evil thoughts and ideas to the more criminal imaginings that spring into our consciousness. Those thoughts we can scarcely believe came from us. We all have those secret dark thoughts.

And yet there is more, the darkness that all of us deal with is shame, and our own embarrassing inadequacy and the private despair that we all harbor, that each of us feels we are unworthy. This is the darkness of shame and dread that pervades our lives at times. This too is a universal experience that can shade our lives.

All of our lives are filled with darkness and fortunately, we can choose where to direct our actions. We can choose to be drawn into the darkness or to the light. That is where Jesus comes to assist us with God's grace.

Jesus comes to shine a light into our darkest corners, the areas we live in fear of having exposed. This light has a profound impact upon us as expressed so clearly in the Eucharistic Prayer when we say, "You have made us worthy to stand before you." Jesus through his Incarnation makes us worthy, makes clear God's love and care for us. Then we are freed to act out of love for one another.

The passages this morning speak of our intimate and eternal connection with the divine creator. "In the beginning..." links the birth of Jesus with the divine Word of God that existed before the world began. Jesus, the Word, existed before time and through time and is intimately connected with each one of us. We spend our lives trying to make sense or coming to comprehend this connection, how Jesus is a part of us and how we bear Christ to the world.

What do we take with us from this experience of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us? The light of Jesus was born again this Christmas into the darkness of our lives. Whatever the nature of the darkness is that each of us harbors. We have been enlightened by the Word made flesh. So, we have been changed. Altered. Made new. How will we let the light of Jesus shine through our lives? Will we choose to walk as a child of the light as the song says? How will the world come to know of our changed nature? How will we manifest this? We must ask these questions quickly and search for answers because the fevered rush of life around us will try to stifle these questions soon enough.

The Vestry closes our meetings with a version of Night Prayers adapted from the New Zealand Prayer Book. The prayer acknowledges the darkness that we all deal with and asks for the light of the Spirit. We pray, "Be present, Spirit of God, within us your dwelling place and home, that this house may be one where all darkness is penetrated by your light."

As we gather on the eve of a New Year, let us bear in mind that the light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness no matter how painful or personal cannot overcome us. This is the Word of God, Jesus, who has come into the world and who never leaves us. Emmanuel, God with us.