

Christmas 1 December 27, 2020

One of the many things I have appreciated about our Vermont leaders during this pandemic is that they have come up with many practical ways for us to confront the difficulty of this time. Governor Scott and others have asked Vermonters to put an extra effort into lighting up their homes for the Christmas season, and many people have done this (also, since we are stuck at home, many have time to do this as well). Elizabeth and I have loved driving around and seeing the Christmas lights on houses and in towns. It is a lovely sight, Since we couldn't decorate the sanctuary this year, we put more effort into putting lights outside to light up a tree, and to show off our newly re-furbished awning in front of the church as well. I believe that there is something about seeing lights, especially in the times that appear so dark and foreboding, that this is a really good thing for us. Almost a form of therapy for our collective soul as we face the difficult days yet to come. And I am deeply grateful for it!

Prayer: O most Holy God, may your Word shine in our hearts this day and illuminate our lives in your Love. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” These nine little words from the prologue to John's Gospel have always had a stirring effect on me. In that prologue, the Johannine community sought to understand the life of Jesus, or perhaps more accurately I should say that they sought to understand the *significance* of the life of Jesus in the context of their lives and the life of the world. It is no accident, of course, but a very direct literary allusion that begins this prologue, “In the beginning was the Word,” harking back to the very inception of the biblical witness, the first words of the Bible in Genesis, “In the beginning, the Lord God created the heavens and the earth.” This firmly locates the Word of God at the origin of all that is, in the creation myth and the development of life itself, inseparably linking the creation of the cosmos with the creative power of the Word. And just so we don't miss it, that first verse of the prologue goes on to say that, “the Word was with God and the Word was God.” OK, got it? This is total and awesome divine power we're talking about here, the creative power of God to order the light and darkness, to create out of the chaos and bring forth life and order. This group of early followers of Jesus saw a *cosmic* significance in his life: the creative power of God that brought forth all that is, seen and unseen, as we say in our Creed, that creative power is at the very heart of their Christian proclamation This is a beacon for these early followers of Jesus: a light for all that shines in the darkness and is not overcome. And the second movement, if you will, in this early community's understanding of the significance of Jesus' life moves closer into their world:

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” This John is one of their fore-runners, a spiritual ancestor, one who saw the light of this Word of God and testified, bore witness in his life to the power of the light of the Word. This is John the Baptist, who stands in the line of the prophets of Israel, the long and distinguished legacy from Elijah to Isaiah, who as we hear this morning, writes, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God...for as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” these are the prophets who speak the Word of God and remind Israel over and over again of God’s care for God’s people and the responsibility of the people to live in justice and equity. John now stands at the end of that great lineage and pointed to the light coming into the world.

And finally, everything changes: in those nine little words: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This is the story for the present time of the community, what has lately taken place for them and for the world in which they live: the divine power of God which created the world and all that it is in it, the divine power that has cared for the people of God throughout their existence and through the vicissitudes of their history, through the ups and downs, through the good times and the bad, this divine power is now manifest in their lives... “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” You might have noticed that I’ve been saying “dwelt among us,” and not “lived among us” like it says in our lesson inserts. I admit it is a slight difference in translation, using more from the Authorized Version, but I think this little difference is worth dwelling on, if you’ll forgive the pun, because it gives a slightly stronger sense of the location of that divine power so important to the Johannine community as they sought to understand the significance of Jesus’ life; another translation could be that the Word “encamped” among us, giving that sense of both the time of the Exodus, when the Hebrew people were freed from their bondage and slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh and built a tabernacle for their worship of God in the Wilderness, and the sense of establishing a “beachhead” sort of like the invasion of Normandy during the Second World War, getting ready for a final conquest. But I do like the King James Version’s “dwelt.” I think that it carries a stronger meaning than “lived” because it gives that sense of location: the Word, now enfleshed, not only lived but dwelt among us. This is to say that the Word of God, that divine power that creates, that divine power that gives life, that divine power that is the very light of the world now has a place: a place right here in human life, a place right here, with you and with me.

These words from the prologue to John's Gospel, these words that helped this small, struggling community of early Christians to begin to put their minds around the incredibly mind blowing realization that God could be found in human form, these words in which this small and obscure group tried to eff the ineffable of what God was doing in their lives, these words have caught the imaginations of many subsequent generations of Christians. In our Anglican theological tradition, the rise of the 19th century Anglican Incarnationalists, such as F.D. Maurice and Charles Gore, were inspired by these words of the divine power of God taking on human life and dwelling among us. And for these Anglican thinkers who put a strong emphasis on the Incarnation, it was not simply an intellectual position, but also an orientation for their lives and for the mission of the Church: just as God had taken on human flesh as the instrument of salvation, they advocated that the Church must raise the dignity of human life and become the champion of the dignity of labor and worker rights, to insure a greater degree of social equality and social inclusion and the prevention of exploitation and abuse of children and always, above all, the Church must reach out to the poorest and the least of these in society. And it is probably needless to say, these positions were not always popular in church circles at the time; the business owners, bankers and industrialists of England thought these clergymen should keep religion out of politics and that their socialist ideas had nothing to do with religion. But I think these Anglican Incarnationalists had a strong point: inspired by the prologue of John's Gospel, they saw the significance of Jesus' life being the divine power of God sanctify all human life and to give a whole new meaning and significance to our lives as well.

In our world today, still struggling through the pandemic but with the hope of vaccines on the way which should stop the spread and destruction caused by Covid 19, this Christmas message rings out with an even more powerful claim on our lives. As we celebrate the coming of the Savior into our world, as we praise God for the light given to our world in Jesus as our Savior, the light which is not overcome by the darkness, as John says. This has not been an easy time for our nation: it is not an easy Christmas season when we cannot gather with friends and family, cannot gather in a candle lit church to praise God together, but that is the world in which we now live today, this is our present reality, and the question for us on this Sunday after Christmas is how do we continue our course in faith? How do those nine little words, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," affect our lives or transform the way in which we see the significance of Jesus' life? Of course, I imagine we will keep on doing some of the mission work we have undertaken based on the belief these words inspire: we will continue to take care of our community in the light of this Good News. We will continue to maintain our physically distanced

worship until it is safe for all of us to come together again, not taking any unnecessary risks to keep everyone safe and healthy and to do what we can now to control the spread of the virus. We will make sure that the least of these in our community are taken care of, such as the by providing a Christmas Eve meal as many of you did this past week, working together to make sure all our fed and healthy. But I think it goes deeper for us as well: in the prologue to John's Gospel, we heard that this Word that dwelt among us is also **the** light of the world, shining in the darkness and not overcome by the darkness. We will continue our worship together on this first Sunday after Christmas with a prayer: acknowledging that God has poured on us the new light of God's incarnate Word, and then asking God to grant that this light might be enkindled in our hearts and shine forth in our lives; and that, that my sisters and brothers, is what I think we are called to do this day: to shine, to let that light of the incarnate Word shine forth in our lives, shine in what we do and just shine in our being, and letting that light shine especially strongly for those who need the light, for those whose lives our all too often about to be overcome by the darkness of poverty, homelessness, disease, unemployment, substance abuse, ignorance and a host of other social ills, to let the light we've been given so graciously be a light for others as well ...and just as importantly, to look for this light shining in others as well, knowing that God has shed this light as a light for the world, a light of the incarnate Word to raise all human flesh to the divine love of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.