

Christmas 1 December 31, 2023

One of the things we did when I was working in Harlem in New York City was a good bit of organizing the tenants in the public housing projects. The last parish I served in New York was surrounded by two large public housing complexes, one to the south with about a dozens 20 story apartment buildings, housing about 10,000 people. There was another large complex to the north, 8 buildings, also 20 stories, housing about 8,000 people. Over half of the members of our congregation lived in these two complexes. Needless to say, I suppose, but since these were public housing facilities, they were chronically underfunded and so maintenance was poor. One acute problem was that the elevators often went out, so this was an issue that really affected our congregation. One Sunday I realized one of our senior women was not in church, and a little worried, given her age, I called her after the service. She was fine and explained that since the elevator was out of service she decided to stay home. But she put this a little more personally; she said, “Rev. Kooperkamp, you’re an ok preacher so I’d walk down twenty flights of stairs to hear you, but you’re not good enough to come to hear if I have to walk back up twenty flights of stairs.” OK, then...and you know I gotta agree with her! But I was thinking about this because with all the rain and unseasonably high temperatures, now the roads in Corinth are in worse shape than high mud season. Talking about the state of the roads, my father in law decided he would just stay home today and say the daily office out of the *Book of Common Prayer*, rather than risk getting stuck in the mud. So I guess even though New York is long behind me, still I’m not yet a good enough preacher to either walk up twenty flights of stairs or to risk getting stuck in the mud for, not even for my own father in law!

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, your Word today is our light, and may this light be our life and truth. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

On Monday, when we gathered on Zoom together with members of St. Mary’s church in Northfield to celebrate Christmas the lessons assigned were almost identical to the lessons we hear this morning. But rightly so, I believe, because John’s account of the Good News in Jesus is revolutionary and it begins in the most extraordinary fashion: revolutionary because 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.

Perhaps that is the call to faith for us as we enter this New Year: during the past few years, with pandemics, wars and gun violence, we have seen quite enough of the bleak side of our world, a bleakness that denies the value of human life and destroys all that is valuable in our society and in our world. God dwelling among us, God with us, this is the power of the divine, of a love supreme that makes all life holy and loving, that draws us closer to God's reign of peace and justice. This is the great gift we celebrate today, as we gather once more, gather together in praise and prayer, gather together to break bread and to open our souls to the gift of God in Christ Jesus, now with us to joyfully lead us in his way of peace. This is God who we acknowledged in our opening prayer at the beginning of our worship: the all loving God who has, poured into our hearts the new light of the incarnate Word, and we prayed that this light, enkindled in our hearts, will also shine forth in our lives, leading us in faith in this coming New Year to undertake God's Holy mission. And that, that my beloved friends, 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 for the amazing grace of this Word and thanks be to Christ, the Word of Love that dwells among us. Amen.