

December 28, 2008

First Sunday After Christmas, Year B (John 1:1-18)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector

Each year when I hear the prologue of John proclaimed at Christmas, the description given of who God is sounds so ethereal. My mind starts swirling and I find myself getting lost in my own internal vision of the enormous expansiveness of God. I don't imagine God as an old man with a beard; I picture in my mind's eye something like the Space Window at the National Cathedral. This window, if you have never seen it, is dark and has a bunch of stars, three large planets, and a moon with an actual lunar rock embedded in the window itself. The images in this window seem overwhelmingly large and in it I feel the constant motion of the planets and the galaxies swirling around me. That is where I go when I hear, "In the beginning was the Word." That is what I think of when I think about the enormity of God, not because I think of God as being removed from us, but because it provides me with a visual reference for beginning to put an image to the indescribable un-embodied God.

And then John proclaims that "the Word became flesh and lived among us." In those words it is incredible to hear about God, who for me is larger than space, the planets and the galaxies; this God choosing to cram Godself into the tiny vessel of one single human being, the child Jesus: both fully human and fully God. What incredible love! Our enormous, expansive, loving, creating God chose to become flesh and blood - to experience what it is to be human; all out of a desire to be in real relationship with us. What an unbelievable gift - God incarnate, God with us. And so we don't have to imagine who God is or what God looks like; we can experience God for ourselves in the flesh and blood, human being to human being.

The magi, the shepherds - all who were witnesses of the newborn child Jesus - all recognize in their own way that this was a powerful gift: God with us. As the magi return to their homes, and the shepherds go back out into the fields with their flocks, they carry in their hearts the knowledge that the world has been changed by the birth of this child. They each carry with them the wonderment of having seen God incarnate in the baby Jesus. But now, after the wonderment of having been guided by a star, after the incredible high of having experienced the visitation of an angel and after the amazement of seeing with their own eyes the miracle of the Christ child alive in the world, now they must return to their every day lives. Transformed by what they have experienced, God here among us - there are still the sheep to tend to, and for the magi foreign lands to travel and families to return home to.

And now that the festivities are over in our own homes, we too must return to our normal routines. It is time to go back to work and soon return to school. But we also have been transformed in our holy remembrance of the birth of Christ. We have

received the unexpected gift of God in the flesh, God incarnate, here in the world to live with us. We carry with us the assurance of God's love for us, the assurance that we will not be alone. No matter how dark our world might feel, no matter how deep into the depths of despair and anxiety we might fall, we are not alone. Whether we are anxious about our financial situation, our employment status, our relationships with our spouse or children, or about the on-going war, whatever the anxiety may be, whatever that darkness is: God is with us in this world, God is there in the darkness and will not let the darkness over come us. Our incarnate God, born of flesh and blood, source of life and light will guide us away from darkness, out of despair and anxiety, back into the light, into the fullness of who we were created to be.

In my former parish in New York, I oversaw a computer and job skills training program for women who were unemployed or underemployed. In this intense eight week program the participants were taught basic computer skills - how to use Microsoft Word, Excel, that sort of stuff. We also had volunteers who assisted them in putting together their resume, and also conducted mock interviews with them. For the women who didn't have access to professional clothing, there was a clothing bank that they could select an outfit or two from. The majority of the women who came into this program were down-trodden: many were victims of domestic violence, or were struggling single mothers; some didn't even have their GED. They had been beaten-down by their situations and were convinced that they could not achieve anything greater. They had been told they were worthless and they believed it. They had succumbed to the darkness. When they completed our program, the entire demeanor of our graduates had been transformed: they were light and glowing, there were smiles on their faces, they exuded confidence. They believed that they could succeed and they did – not only in obtaining appropriate jobs, but in other areas of their lives as well. The transition from darkness to light was not so much because of the skills gained in the computer classes, or the mock interview sessions, it came about because of the incarnational relationships that were forged between them and the volunteers and among the participants themselves. Incarnational relationships, real relationships, human being to human being. The confidence and light in these graduates came from knowing that they were not alone, that someone was there to walk with them out of their darkness and into a new life filled with possibilities and hope.

When we are freed from anxiety and despair, freed from the paralysis of the darkness then there is the possibility for real transformation, for real relationships to be forged. Those incarnational relationships occur here in those we build with one another in our GIFT, EfM, or foyer groups, or in serving on a guild together, in our ministries to refugees, or with our guests at Threads or in serving with the guys at Covenant Community. They are real relationships, human being to human being. God sends us out into the world to build those transformative relationships with those around us. Having experienced the incarnate word in the child Jesus, we now are charged with being witnesses to the light. Witnesses who will carry that light out into the world outside those doors. And so, with thankful hearts for the gift of God incarnate among us, we are drawn back out into our lives in the world, to scatter the darkness for others, to be witnesses to the light.