

December 27, 2009

The First Sunday of Christmas

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

John 1:1-18

The Rev'd Daron Vroon

*"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."
In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Merry Christmas, everyone!

But at the risk of putting a dent in our Christmas spirit, I just have to ask: what makes Christmas so merry? Not to be a downer, but it seems that Christmases come and go while our problems persist. Sure, individual issues change from year to year, but the big problems stick around. Poverty, war, suffering, depression, illness, death -- these are all part of our daily lives.

Earlier this week, I was visited by an old family friend. Asked how she was doing, she said rather matter-of-factly that she was in the midst of an existential crisis. When we asked her to elaborate, she told us that she was struggling with questions about who she is, what she has done with her life, and where she is headed. In other words she is struggling to understand her own story and its significance. See, her mother is in the midst of renal failure -- the result of a genetic malady -- and is in need of a new kidney. Thankfully, our friend did not inherit this malady. But still, questions of illness and death have been at the forefront of her mind. What is so sad about my friend's situation is not that it is extraordinary, but that it is so normal. Everyone comes to a point when they must struggle with -- and come to grips with -- their mortality. Death still seems to have a grip on us.

We are talking about big problems, here. These are cosmic problems. What does the birth of one small child, however extraordinary he is, mean in the face of all this. These are heavy questions for the first Sunday of the supposedly joyful season of Christmas. But before you accuse me of being a scrooge, or worse, become one yourself, let me quickly say that I do think that there is reason to be merry on Christmas, and that the key to understanding why lies in the Gospel reading for this morning.

What we read was the famous Prologue of the Gospel according to St. John. As in the other gospels, John uses his opening to set the stage for the remainder of his book. However, unlike the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which set the stage by encoding Jesus' significance in the narratives of Jesus' birth and the beginning of his ministry, John cuts right to the chase in one of the most beautiful and theologically dense passages in all of Holy Scripture.

It is clear from the very first verse that John attributes cosmic significance to the story he is about to tell by linking it with nothing less than God's act of creation. "In the beginning," he starts. The only other book of the bible to start this way is

Genesis and its account of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." John tells us that in that place before time and space -- or with our modern understanding of space-time, we might say outside of time and space -- there is not only God, but the Word. This Word is both separate from God and equated with God -- He is with God and He is God. Clearly, there are strong Trinitarian overtones here. In Genesis, God's Word is the means by which God creates: God says ... and it is so. In John, that Word is not just the means, but the agent of creation. All things are created through Him.

That Word is not only our source, but also our destination. In Him is the life that is the light of all people. It is in this Image that we are created, and thus it is by being rooted in Him that we experience true life. In other words, we were created to share in the divine life. God our Father, by means of His Word has created a story in which all of humanity is united to Him in selfless love, thereby tapping into the infinite source of light and life.

So what went wrong? As co-authors of our own story, humanity has chosen to turn its back on that light in favor of darkness. Rather than seeking our meaning in the life of God, we instead settle for seeking meaning in our own selves. This is what humanity calls "freedom," but in reality it is slavery. As much as we try to deny it, we all know what happens when we trade the infinite source of light and life for our own finitude. We find ourselves in existential crisis. We lose our story, our sense of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. We trade our happy ending for tragedy, life for death.

What is God to do with us? Does He leave us to our darkness, write us off as a failed story? Does He remove our freedom and force us back into unity with the divine as automatons? St. Athanasius, in his excellent and accessible treatise *On the Incarnation* says the following.

"What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Saviour Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, Who could recreate man made after the Image." (13)

"The Word became flesh and lived among us."

This is the story of Christmas. In this blessed season, we celebrate nothing less than our recreation in God's Image -- not by force; not by scrapping the original plans and starting over. Rather, the eternal and unchanging God has taken on a story. He has entered our story. He is born, he grows up, he lives, he loves, he suffers, and he dies. In so doing, God has taken up our story into his own. Our poverty, our suffering, our ignorance, our sin, our brokenness, and yes, even our death have all become part of God's experience. And to that experience God adds the Resurrection hope, the transformation of death into new and unending life in Him. Thus, in this little, helpless baby, born in a stable, sleeping in a feeding

trough, the purpose of God has not only become known but it has been enacted in our midst.

Through no act of our own, we have become participants in God's story, in the person of Jesus Christ. In the beginning, we are baptized and united with that story. In the Eucharist, we renew that connection and become the continuation of that story in the world. Throughout our life and death, in the midst of our trials and tribulations, and despite our sin and brokenness, we live in the sure hope that we can always turn towards the Word of light and life and be swept up into the divine life that is our source and our inheritance. And I cannot think of a better reason to be merry.

So, a very Merry Christmas to all of you. And God bless us, every one.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.