

A Sermon for Christmas Day, Year B
December 25, 2005 – Luke 2: 1–20
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God comes into our lives.

Several weeks ago during Adult Sunday School we were discussing the lectionary readings for that day, and the introductory passage to the Gospel of John came up for discussion. Of course, this is the passage which begins “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” During the conversation, our rector recalled that during the early seventies every Episcopal service he attended ended with a reading of this passage, and he wanted to know if anybody else remembered that. Unfortunately, the only other person in the room who was an Episcopalian at the time – Kate Wood – was also four years old then. Consequently no one could corroborate Father Jim’s recollection. But as we sat there and discussed the passage, I couldn’t help but think, what a mind-numbingly tedious technique for smothering the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now I make that bold claim based on a solid appreciation of the prologue to the Gospel of John and its elaborate theology. John synthesized Greek philosophy – the Word or “Logos” was a Hellenistic or Greek concept representing the universal power or mind that gives coherence to the universe (much like the concept of “the Force” in the “Star Wars” movies) – with Jewish theology. By doing so, John transformed Christian philosophy and made the faith of a handful of laborers from the fringes of the Roman Empire intellectually accessible to the sophisticated minds of that Empire. Nor do I intend to denigrate the modern appreciation of John’s Gospel. Books are still written seeking to plumb its mysteries. No, my concern is that hearing it read each and every week, especially at the conclusion of the service when most people are thinking about heading out to the parish hall for food and fellowship, well, dilutes the message.

And that’s true about the contemporary approach to the other Christmas passages from the Gospels. Today we heard the story of the birth of Jesus from Luke, probably made popular, of course, by the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. In case you’ve never seen the program – which is difficult since it’s been broadcast now for forty consecutive years – Charlie Brown, overcome by the commercialization of Christmas, cries out in anguish, “Doesn’t any body know the true meaning of Christmas!?!?!” His friend Linus answers, “Sure, Charlie Brown, I know the true meaning of Christmas,” and proceeds to tell the story of the birth of Jesus from Luke. Despite this, somehow the crass commercialization of Christmas has continued unabated.

But that’s a topic for another Christmas. My point is that reading the prologue to the Gospel of John at the conclusion of every service and hearing the nativity narrative from Luke *ad nauseum* can lead to these passages become hackneyed or commonplace. They lose their punch; they become religious elevator music, instantly familiar but empty of any content. And that’s as different as it could be from the original context of these passages. For their first audience, these stories were both challenging and confrontational. The *logos*, the philosophical concept that gives the universe its form and structure, becoming incarnate as a human person? Impossible, absurd.

The promised Messiah, the Son of the Most High, is a babe lying in a feeding trough and being worshiped by sheep herders from the sticks? Give me a break.

The Gospel stories did not fit the expectations of their first audience. The Jewish people in first century Judea were expecting a military leader to lead a rebellion against the occupying armies of Rome and restore the glories of Israel from the reigns of King David and King Solomon; nobody was expecting a helpless baby born in an obscure tiny town who would heal and preach in the sticks of Galilee and suffer a humiliating public execution. Their story of a baby born in a stable instead of a conquering hero was meant to, well, shock and awe.

And our Lord continued to defy people's expectations throughout his ministry. He upset the preconceptions and prejudices of his contemporaries by telling stories which were never what people expected to hear. In reply to a lawyer's cynical question "Just who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to demonstrate that being a neighbor was a matter of what you did rather than who you are. Responding to criticism that he associated with undesirables, Jesus told the story of a father who raced to forgive a younger son who had squandered his inheritance. The stories and lessons of Jesus share the same fate as the Christmas stories: they seem commonplace to us now, but in their original context and for their original audience, they were revolutionary.

Have no doubt about it, ours is a radical religion. The heart of the Christmas message overturns all of our preconceptions about ourselves and our relationship with God. At the risk of crossing the line into heresy on Christmas day of all times, I'm here to proclaim that the message of the Christmas story is not mangers or angels or even philosophical concepts such as the Word becoming incarnate. The message of Christmas is not "Jesus is the reason for the season." All of those are valid, but they're all limousines which chauffeur a very simple yet radical message.

The message of Christmas is that God comes into our lives in surprising ways at unexpected times. It's easy to perceive God in a familiar Christmas story or a beautiful sunset or in the hospitality of our neighbors. But God is also present where we least expect to find him, such as in sorrow at the time of death or in hearts broken by sadness and loss. And here is a mystery which I confess I do not understand: God is present at those times through *us*, through *our* responses and *our* ministries. When *we* bring the love of God to those times and experiences where we least expect to find him, *we* are the Christmas present that God continues to give to his creation. And that is something that God has never stopped doing, making every day Christmas day. Amen.