

Weekend of Sunday, January 2, 2022

2nd Sunday of Christmas/Year C

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

Gospel Reading: John 1:1-18

Sermon Title: “Incarnate Word”

Theme

John begins his gospel with this prologue: a hymn to the Word through whom all things were created. This Word became flesh and brought grace and truth to the world.

Text

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

Sermon

The Gospel Reading for today is John's alternative account of the beginning of Jesus. But even that simple expression I just said requires some explanation, because according to John's Gospel account, the person of Jesus, has existed from "the beginning" – however we understand that, if we can understand that.

And I used the word "alternative" not to mean that we can pick this version of the beginning of Jesus over the others, Luke, for example, because we cannot. Together, the whole corpus of scripture reveals what God wants us to know about Jesus, God's Son.

And today is the perfect day to have that discussion because, on Christmas Eve, we heard Luke's beautiful version that we all love to hear that time of year. And yesterday, Saturday, January 1, was the "lesser festival" of the Name of Jesus. Let's address the Name of Jesus first.

By Jewish law, every baby boy was circumcised and named on the eighth day of life, so on the eighth day of Christmas (at least the day on which we celebrate his birth) the church celebrates this event. The eighth day of Christmas is January 1.

Furthermore, Jesus' name is a sign of God's salvation given to us through him. How is that you ask?

In Hebrew: יהושע ~ "*God saves*" - pronounced *Yeshua*

Jesus was actually a fairly common name in the First Century, as common as Jim or John or Mary are today. But as common as the name was, Jesus was named "Jesus" by design. In the ancient Hebrew, which Jesus may have spoken but was not his first tongue, his name was יהושע, pronounced *Yeshua*. The name is made up of two parts: *Ya*, which is short for Yahweh, the name of God, and *hoshea*, which means "salvation." So therefore, Mary and Joseph gave their little baby the name *Yeshua*—"God saves." *Jesus* is simply the anglicized pronunciation of *Yeshua*.

However, it was actually God who named the child and that name came to Joseph through an angel. From Matthew's Gospel we read,

Matthew 1:20-21" an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

So Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was from God through the Holy Spirit, though they had difficulty articulating how. And we can relate. There has never been another Son of God, so we have no constructs from which we can begin to understand Jesus. And Matthew, Mark, and Luke make no attempt to say anything about Jesus before his conception and nativity.

But John, the author of the Gospel Reading for today went much farther back didn't he? John began his gospel with the ambiguous, "In the beginning." When? "In the beginning." And just when was that? "In the beginning." You see the trouble. This question has consumed theologians, philosophers, and inquisitive laypeople ever since.

As Christians, scripture teaches and we believe that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. God incarnate, in other words, God embodied in flesh. In essence, we believe that Jesus was—and is—as completely God as God, and as completely human as us. That is, Jesus experienced the same full range of human emotions and physical realities that we experience today all while being fully divine and completely without sin. It's no surprise that this divine mystery remains difficult to grasp.

The dual nature of Jesus, at the same time fully human and fully divine, is called the *hypostatic union*, a term you do not need to remember because it is hardly ever used outside of theological circles. This concept was affirmed in the Augsburg Confession, a founding and defining document of Lutheranism, but only after the church rejected many other beliefs about Jesus' identity which were eventually labeled heresies. A heresy is a belief or opinion that is contrary to the orthodox, or correct, doctrine or teachings of the church. Among those theories were:

- *Adoptionism* - Jesus was human and God gave him special powers.
- *Docetism* - Jesus looked human but was really divine.
- *Eutychianism* – Jesus was human but became divine.

Why would I bring up these ancient heresies now? Because every generation, every person has to struggle with the same issue of who and what is Jesus. Our answers, individually and collectively, define our spiritual and moral lives. And the church trusts that God's will is done, through the work of the Holy Spirit, even when opinions differ and there is no way of knowing. In other words, Christians trust that the Holy Spirit has inspired the church to conclude what it has written about Jesus in its creeds.

Even though we can't easily explain the how of Christ's identity, we believe that this *hypostatic union* is central to what we know about God. It tells us what God wants us to know about God's self. In becoming fully human, God revealed in Jesus Christ experienced the whole of human life and death. Because of that, God revealed in Jesus Christ stands with us in every one of our experiences, not just as a divine presence but as one who knows pain and suffering and joy and love and loss and betrayal and friendship. Finally, the hypostatic union tells us that God chose us in all our human frailty and loves us, not despite our humanity, but because of it.

Jesus is fully human and fully God. Both, at the same time. All the time. And trying to figure out how that can be can be confounding.

Even if we have a hard time explaining how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine, we can still affirm the cause and effect of this mystery. God revealed in Jesus Christ became fully human while remaining fully divine so that we might know God in a way we were unable to before Jesus.

God revealed in Jesus Christ chose us; chose to become like us, to live like us, and to die like us, and as a result, we can say that Jesus is Immanuel (God with us), thus fulfilling the prophecy told about him in Isaiah (7:14).

The understanding of Jesus as fully human and fully divine became the accepted position of the church only after it rejected many other explanations – those heresies I mentioned earlier. For some people, it's easier to understand who and what Jesus is by first clarifying who and what he isn't. We might struggle to understand how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine, but most of us can agree that Jesus was not faking his humanity or his divinity. Somehow, he truly was both.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

In faith, we Christians believe that scripture tells us what God wants us to know about God's self. And from the Gospel Reading for today we learn that the Son of God exists as part of the Divine Community ~ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore, John wrote that God exists from "the beginning." And though:

¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

I don't want to speak for you, but there is no way I can understand that, so I simply believe it in faith. I have to believe it in faith, because without grace given through Jesus Christ, we are all doomed. But according to John,

^{16b} we have all received, grace upon grace.

And that is Good News!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, In Jesus you have filled the world with light and life, and through him have brought grace upon grace. We thank you that your love for us is so strong that you would come among us, be one among us, in the person of Jesus. Though we are filled with questions about him, give us faith in him, so that we can know you better. We pray this in his name. Amen