

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

December 28, 2008

Christmas 1B 2008

In the Name of our One, Holy, ever mysterious God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

After four services in two days and with Christmas falling on a Thursday, I was hoping that the lectionary was going to pitch me some easy ones this Sunday. No such luck! While most other churches are getting Luke's account of the presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple, we Episcopal clergy get the prologue to the Gospel of John – probably the densest 18 verses in the entire Bible. We read these Gospel verses each year on the Sunday following Christmas.

John is the preferred theological Gospel of the Church which is ironic since the Gospel of John almost didn't make it into the official canon of the Bible decided at church councils at the end of the Fourth Century. Even so, you'll find it safely tucked away in the middle of Luke's "orderly account" of his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. John gets put in the lectionary after major events in the three Synoptic Gospels to make sure we get the theological significance of these events.

I can't entirely unpack today's Gospel lesson in one short sermon except to say that it is John who really puts the Christ into Christmas even though his Gospel has no birth narrative. John was the last Gospel written, probably in the early second century. The author was familiar with the three earlier Gospel texts and with the best of Jewish and Greek philosophical thought of his day. John's gospel is a theological commentary on the life of Jesus.

Today's 18 verses are best understood as an Overture. When I go to a musical, the orchestra's playing of an overture takes me out of the present moment, tunes my emotions to be receptive to what is to follow and fills my mind with a logical sense of expectation about what is to unfurl in the play. There is nothing more special than a birth. I know that when a baby is born into my family or to close friends I celebrate not only the new arrival, but I wonder at the child's future and the impact and meaning of his or her life. That is what today's lesson from John is about.

The birth of the infant Jesus is not just about the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies. John makes clear that it is to be understood as an earth shattering event that makes possible the transformation of our human nature and of all Creation. It is the entry of God into humanity and all creation through the birth of this child – “and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” John takes this Word – the creative power of God – is taken back into the Divine One prior to Creation, before time itself. The Word was life itself and in him was the light of all people. Here was the source of life and thus the One which darkness could not overshadow. This clearly is no ordinary event.

John then makes reference to John the Baptist. This takes this eternal Word and us back into real time – to the present. He prepares us for the rejection of Jesus by his own people and his crucifixion. However, we have the assurance that the source of life is eternally divine; a light that cannot be extinguished.

John then gets to the big “So What?” question. The birth of this child Jesus, his coming into the world is a transformative event. For those who believe in him is given the power to become children of God, born not of flesh but of the will of God. It is an amazing claim – one that distinguishes the Christian faith from all others.

John is talking about not only the creative power of God but also about the re-creative power of God in us through faith in the living, eternal Christ.

Theology can be described as faith seeking understanding. To describe the nature of God and the significance of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, John used the best knowledge from the cultures he knew at that time. But what about us? There is a lot of theological controversy going on now in the church. Many fundamentalist Christians would say that our theology stops with John. They decry anyone who does not use John's language and concepts. But I ask you whether you think our knowledge of the universe and creation stopped in the second century? I think the reality is that our new knowledge of Creation always gives us theological work to do.

John says we, through Christ, receive grace upon grace. God is always creating and through Christ we are brought into this creative process. In short, what we think, what we value, what we decides, what we do matters beyond ourselves. Becoming, through faith in Jesus the Christ, what John calls "Children of God" means being the active Body of Christ in this time and place. Christ is present through us individually and corporately. If we believe this, the world changes. We can never look at another person as an object; we can never accept being treated as an object ourselves. This is very radical stuff; we are called into ministries of justice and mercy. We are called to live into Christ by following his example, by being a holy community, by loving one another as He loved us.

That is heavy stuff. We struggle with it the Sunday after Christmas so that we are mindful about the possibilities the life of this Child holds for us as we read about

his life and teachings. Christmas is not just about sweet little baby Jesus; it is also about us and our future.

Amen.