

This reading, the Christmas story in John's Gospel, is so much larger than Luke's version that we heard last week or Matthew's version that we will hear next Christmas—so much larger, in fact, that we don't call it a birth narrative. Instead, we refer to the prologue.

But this passage *is* a birth narrative. Cosmic in scope, yes, but there is an essential human aspect as well. Ironically, the cosmic perspective is almost easier for us to envision than it is for us to see our own human participation in Christ's work of reconciliation.

If Matthew and Luke tell us something about *who* the child Jesus born in Bethlehem was, John tells us *why* this particular birth matters to us. Christmas is more than a holiday. For Episcopalians especially, Christmas is a cherished reminder of an incarnational reality that saturates our whole life. And so every year, on the first Sunday following Christmas, we hear this passage from John and contemplate the on-going significance of Christmas.

That makes this Sunday a bit like “graduate Christmas”—a follow-up to the other nativity stories that we hear on Christmas day. John's poetic and decidedly unsentimental prologue takes us deep, deep, deep into the incarnational mystery that fills us with hope, peace, joy and love throughout the coming year.

Now, I've never met anyone who comes to church *only* on the Sunday after Christmas. Maybe that's because John's Christmas story says nothing about angels or shepherds or magi, and never mentions Joseph or Mary or kings. There are references to John the Baptizer and to Jesus, but John's Gospel does not seem much interested in the birth of either of them. John's story focuses instead on the difference that the birth of Jesus makes for all of us.

Let me explain. John's nativity story gives us two poetic lines that deal with what we call the Incarnation—with the birth, that is, of the Christ-child. The first line: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And then that very Word, John's story continues, “became flesh and lived among us.”

And that's about it: John's entire nativity story, the story of God manifesting fully in human form to live and die as one of us so that we might live and love and die more like Christ. It's not that the nativity of Jesus doesn't matter, but rather that John wants to emphasize something else.

John tells his nativity story in just two lines so that he can concentrate on the significance of Jesus' birth as it relates to our own. John is less interested in the birth of a babe at Bethlehem than he is in the birth of you and me as children of God. The meat of John's Christmas story is sandwiched between the two lines about the nativity.

Listen, again, to the verses in between: "He [the Word,] He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him....to all who received him, who believed in his name, *he gave power to become children of God...*"

Is that not astonishing? The True Light that enlightens everyone came so that we might become children of God. Try to drink that in for a moment. You and I are God's children, radiating our inheritance of Divine love so that God can use us to change the world. Christ, the Self-expression of God, was born, lived, died and was raised again. This was not simply to pay some obscure penalty for sin but to remind us, to *show* us, just how much God loves us and always will.

Maybe it is hard to catch the full impact of that claim. Maybe it is hard because we confuse those things that *describe* us with those things that *define* us. We can be described by our race, our gender, our sexuality. We can be described by our culture, our social status, our education. Whether we are married, single, divorced or widowed. Our age, our life experiences, the languages we speak. These are not trivial, but they only *describe* us. They do *not* define us.

What describes us is important but insufficient, valuable but partial, meaningful but not definitive. What is *definitive*—what transcends and includes those things that describe us—is our identity as children of God. *God* has defined us as God's own children. Children of a family that God loves infinitely. A family of children that God inspires and emboldens to spread love and forgiveness, justice and mercy, peace and wholeness for all of God's beloved creation.

Now, if you are at all like me, right about now, the hesitations and the protests, the self-doubts start to wake up and creep in. God knows we have all hurt or disappointed other people and ourselves. There is a little prayer that says: "Lord, I have not sinned this day. I have not gossiped or said anything unkind or untrue. I have not been selfish, arrogant or overindulgent. But be not far from me, Lord, for in a few minutes, I must get out of bed."

This is precisely why John's Christmas message is essential for us to hear year after year once the emotional flush of Christmas day is behind us. Most of

our self-doubts are rooted in something that is *descriptively* true. We have all said unkind or untrue things and we have all been selfish, but those actions do not define who we are. No, what defines each and every one of us who trusts the deepest nature of Christ is this: God gave us “power to become children of God...”

The inherent capacity for humanity to become Christ-like is realized through processes called divinization or *theosis* in the Greek. As early as the second century, St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, said that God became what we are in order to make us what God is. A century later, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, whom the Orthodox call the “Father of Orthodoxy,” taught that we become by grace what God is by nature. Ever since the English Reformation, Anglicans have been re-examining and expanding our particular understanding of *theosis* that is actually quite close to the Orthodox version.

We acknowledge that, despite our limitations and even through our wounds, God makes us God’s children in part so that the world may come to know God in Christ. But also God makes us God’s children so that all people may come to know and experience what it means to be fully human, the created image of God. With God’s help, we are encouraged to live as God’s children with hope, love and trust in God. Together with God, we reach out to a broken world to share the hope, love and trust that God has granted.

And so, on Christmas morning, we celebrate the manifestation of God in the Christ-child, our brother Jesus. During the rest of the Christmas season, we continue the celebration of our own adoption as children of God. The season ends on Epiphany, the day that we celebrate the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, the Magi, who represent the larger world beyond the immediate community and culture of the Holy Family.

That’s because beyond the celebration, there is life-long purpose: to live into our identity as children of God, as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. To apply our faith in ways that actively participate in God’s process of making us more Christ-like, more fully human. With our consent and trust, Emmanuel—God with us—promises to work with us and within us, using our lives just as they are to continue to bring grace, love and light even into the darkest of places.

You see, Jesus is not alone in God’s “Word-made-flesh.” Jesus, our brother, has siblings—you and I and many, many others—and every of us has a word that God has given as a gift to bring to life. For some, the word is “compassion.” For others, “justice.” For still others, “patience.” Maybe the

word you have been given is “generosity,” “wisdom,” “healing” or maybe it is “prophecy,” like John the Baptizer.

Whatever it is, the moment you act on one of these, the word becomes flesh. Let me leave you some words to ponder in your own heart this Christmas season from Howard Thurman’s poem titled “The Work of Christmas”:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.¹”

¹ Thurman, Howard. *The Mood of Christmas*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.