

God Among Us
John 1:1-18
December 30, 2007

I.

We just heard one of the most important passages in the Bible because it tells us who Jesus Christ really is. That's why this part of John's Gospel is the appointed reading in the Episcopal lectionary every year at this time. In fact, it's so important that I gave a sermon on a shorter section of this reading on Christmas morning. And I would like to expand on that today.

Let me read just the first three verses of the reading again, along with verse fourteen. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

What a lyrical and mystical statement! At first glance we might just skip over this passage because it seems abstract. We might not think that it speaks to us like other parts of the Bible.

For example, we know the Christmas stories in the Gospels and Matthew and Luke. We can visualize them. We see them on Christmas cards. We see pictures of the manger, the shepherds, and the star of Bethlehem. Most of our Christmas carols are based on Matthew or Luke.

Today's reading, however, is more cosmic and mystical. It's harder to visualize. If we were artists, how would we draw a picture of this reading for a Christmas card? How would we compose a Christmas carol based on this reading? There is nothing about a manger, or shepherds, or a star.

And let's digress for a moment. Why is John's Gospel so different? One reason might be that as Christianity spread, other religious groups arose that started to change parts of the story about Jesus. John might have wanted to set the record straight.

There might be another reason. We know from the end of John's Gospel that after Jesus' death John took Mary, Jesus' mother, into his home and cared for her, probably for the rest of her life.

Think about their time together. Imagine what they talked about. What kind of stories could Mary have told? She certainly had a special understanding of Jesus that no one else in the world could have had, and she would have been able to share this with John as time passed.

No wonder John's Gospel is different. Part of his research came from the mother of our Lord herself. Think about that when you read John.

II.

But let's get back to this reading. Two books in the Bible open with the words "In the beginning." One is the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, which says "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The other is last Gospel in the New Testament, John, which says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him. And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

Both books, Genesis and John, start in eternity, beyond time and space, and both books then come into time and space. Genesis describes the creation of the universe from the formless void, and John proclaims the birth of Jesus from the eternal Word.

And by using the term "Word," John conveyed a special meaning. For us, in our everyday English usage, our "word" can be something we say, or a promise we make. The term "Word" also can mean Scripture. The Bible, for example, is the Word.

In John's Gospel, however, the term "Word" is an English translation of a more complex Greek idea. The original Greek described the eternal Christ in heaven from which Christ on earth became known to us for our salvation. Going back to English, John said that the Word became flesh, which implies a transition from one thing to another. He said that the heavenly Christ, who always has existed, became the Christ in this world and walked among us for a time.

This means that the loving and merciful God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is nothing less than the powerful and sovereign God universally revealed to all people in the Book of Genesis.

It means that in Christ we meet God as God wants to be known to us. Jesus brought us face to face with God, not in some cosmic and eternal sense, even though the Word is cosmic and eternal, but rather by making God's love for us evident in a real and tangible way.

John's proclamation of this Good News in Christ reminds me of the story of the fellow who visited his friend, who was a music teacher. The fellow walked in his friend's office, and in a somewhat offhand way said, "So, professor, what's the good news for today?"

The music teacher didn't say a thing. He just picked up a tuning fork, struck it with a mallet, and produced a tone. Then he said, "The good news is that was middle C, it was middle C yesterday, it will be middle C tomorrow, and it will be middle C forever. And that's the good news."

The same kind of good news is in John's Gospel. It tells us that Jesus Christ always has been and always will be. Today's reading expands the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke so that we not only hear of Jesus' birth in a manger, we also know exactly who that baby in the manger was.

By comparison, the traditional stories in Matthew and Luke emphasized Jesus' human nature even though they also recognized that he was the Messiah. He had all the characteristics of other babies. He burped and cried, and did all the other things that babies do. Revelation of his divinity came later in those Gospels.

John's Gospel, however, immediately proclaimed that this fully human baby also was fully God because he was born from the Word as the earthly expression of God. Through Jesus, God actually revealed himself and his character to us. We look at Jesus and we see God.

I once heard a well-known preacher say that if God wanted to communicate with cows, Jesus would have been a cow. If God wanted to communicate with birds, Jesus would have been a bird. But God wanted to communicate with us, and so he sent his Son to us as a human being.

III.

And in addition to telling us who Jesus was, today's Gospel also told what he did. It not only said that Jesus was the light of the world, but also proclaimed that he overcame the darkness.

What did John mean by darkness? Certainly it was something more than the absence of light. At some times the absence of light can be good, and not something to be overcome. In the same way cold is the absence of heat, and silence is the absence of sound, and they aren't always bad.

So, darkness, in the sense of John's Gospel, means more than just the absence of something. It refers to a thing that has its own existence; its own reality. And that thing is the work of evil in the world that produces sin in our lives. That is what the light of Jesus overcame, beginning with his birth, and continuing on through the cross and the Resurrection.

Jesus as the light also worked in two other ways. Because he was both God and man, he was both the divine light and the worldly light. As the divine light he revealed God. He showed us who God is, and how God loves us. Jesus could do this because he was divine himself.

But as the worldly light he shined in the other direction. He personified us to God. Through his life here God could experience how we think, how we feel; and how we long for love. Jesus could do this because he was human and knew us intimately.

IV.

Another story illustrates this point. I believe I told it at this time last year, but it's worth repeating. It starts with a farmer who didn't believe in God, but his wife did believe. One snowy Christmas Eve, his wife was preparing to go to church and asked him to come and hear the story of Jesus' birth. But he said, "That's nonsense! If God exists, why would he lower himself to come to Earth as a man?"

So she left and he stayed home. A while later the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard, and the man sat down to relax in front of the fireplace.

Then he heard a loud thump; something had hit the window. He looked out, but couldn't see anything. When the snow let up he went outside and saw that a flock of wild geese had gotten lost in the storm. They just flew around in circles, blindly and aimlessly.

The man felt sorry for the geese, and thought his barn would be a good place for them to stay for the night. So he opened the barn doors wide, hoping the Geese would notice and go inside. But they just fluttered around and stayed outside.

Then he tried to get their attention, but that scared them away. He got some bread, broke it up, and made a bread crumb trail to the barn. They still didn't catch on. He even got behind them and tried to shoo them toward the barn, but that didn't work either. Nothing could get them to go into the barn.

Then he realized that the geese wouldn't follow a human. "If only I were a goose, then I could save them," he said out loud, and then had an idea. He got one of his own geese from the barn, and released it from behind the flock of wild geese. His goose flew straight through the flock and back into the barn, and one-by-one, the other geese saw and followed it to safety.

He stood silently for a moment as the words he had spoken replayed in his mind: "If only I were a goose, then I could save them!" Then he thought about what he had said to his wife earlier. "Why would God want to be like us?"

Suddenly it all made sense. That is exactly what God had done. We were like the geese; blind, lost, perishing. And God sent Jesus Christ to become like us so he could show us the way and save us.

As the winds died down, his soul became quiet and he understood why Christ had come. Years of doubt and disbelief vanished with the storm. He fell to his knees in the snow, and prayed his first prayer. "Thank You, God, for coming in human form to get me out of the storm!"

V.

Today's reading challenges us to reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ. If we think he was only a man, or a great teacher or a prophet, then we might as well forget about him. There will be nothing there to help us when we need it, and as only a man he could not offer us salvation.

But if he is God, as he claimed to be and as John told us today, then we are called to yield our lives to him. We are called to worship and serve him, and live our lives as he taught us, secure in our Christian hope of eternal life. God wants us to believe in him in the way that he believes in us, because he came to us so that we might come to him. *Amen.*