

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day • December 25, 2019
Isaiah 9:2-7 • Psalm 96 • Titus 2:11-14 • Luke 2:1-20

Imagine that you were alive some nineteen hundred years ago, hearing of Jesus for the first time through St. John's gospel. What would you notice? What you would find surprising? Perhaps, most obviously, you'd notice that John's story of Jesus doesn't start with Jesus. It begins at the very beginning. Not the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Not at the beginning of Jesus' life. But at the beginning with a capital B. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Before humanity, before creation, before time, was the Word.

For John, the Word is not simply a sound or a series of letters, but a structure, a system, an order. As long as God has been God, God has had an intention, a purpose, that undergirds and supports all of creation. And that intention, that purpose that John calls the Word is to create, to love, to sustain, and to be in relationship. "All things," John writes, "came into being through him." Meaning time, creation, and humanity have always carried the design of God's great love.

God has always created, spoken, active through that Word. This Word was not born two thousand years ago and placed in a manger in Bethlehem. It has always been woven into our story. John starts at the beginning, because he wants us to understand that when Abraham and Sarah were grafted into God's covenant, it was the Word of God that brought them hope. That when God's people were enslaved in Egypt, it was the Word of God that brought them across the sea into freedom. That when the Israelites lived in exile, it was the Word of God that promised a return to their home and to their covenant. For the people who first heard John's gospel nearly two thousand years ago, the message is clear. When you survey the course of history, you are looking at a story that reveals that heart of God's character.

But it's not just about history, of course. This Word wasn't just present in the beginning. It's the same Word that upholds, guides, and sustains Jesus' life, too. When a wedding at Cana became a festival of abundance, it was because of that Word of God. When five thousand were fed on the mountain, it was the Word of God that filled them. And when Lazarus walked out of his tomb, it was the Word of God that returned him to life.

So before we hear the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, John wants us to remember that, in some way, nothing new is happening here. The Word spoken in the beginning is the same Word made flesh. The Word is manna in the desert and the bread of life. The Word is the water from the rock and the water that satisfies. The word is exodus from Egypt and liberation from death.

Before we hear the story of Jesus' life, John wants us to remember that we are not encountering something different here. That the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus' are not the result of God's change of heart. They are not a Old Testament "God of wrath" and a New Testament "God of love." They are not a Plan B stuck into history. In some ways, nothing new is happening here.

Except for something radically new. That this Word "became flesh and lived among us." That the entirety of God's intentions, God's purpose, God's character, has been poured out into this one, singular human life, a life the author of Hebrews calls "the very imprint of God's very being." Because of this one human life, creation reveals the fullness of God's character. It show us that there is no God behind God. There is no other face. There is no change of heart. This is who God is. This is how God acts. This is how God loves.

So what we encounter in Jesus is not simply an example to live our lives by. It is not a bunch of advice for how to live a better life. It is not some escape hatch to get out of this world and get

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into heaven. What we find is the character of God poured out, made vulnerable so that there is nothing left for it to hide behind.

There's a reason why we don't hear John's gospel on Christmas Eve when the big crowds come to church. One reason, the reason I would probably tell you if you asked me, is that our lectionary always puts it on Christmas Day and it is out of my hands. But the real reason is that we like a story. We like shepherds and magi, Mary and Joseph, livestock and infants. We like hymns about silent nights and mangers holy and lowly. I get it. There's nothing wrong with all that.

But the emphasis those stories put on the birth of Jesus can lull us into thinking that Christmas is some kind of miracle. A categorically distinct event dropped in from the sky. A place where the rules of nature seem to break and something exceptional happens. John says something else. What happened two thousand years ago is actually not a miracle. It is creation becoming fully realized. Becoming what it always has been

And so it is for us. When we come to find this Word among us, we too become the truest versions of ourselves. The gift of Christmas that the same Word that spoke in the beginning speaks among us today. The Word that spoke in the beginning and called creation "good" is the same Word that speaks to us with words of grace and truth. The Word became flesh and lived among us. And by water and word, bread and wine, it still does.

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