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God with Us

I think it is interesting that the Church, in her wisdom, has chosen to use the same Gospel text as optional for Christmas Eve, for Christmas Day and for the 1st Sunday of Christmas. Here at St. Anne's we have heard from the first chapter of John twice. We heard it yesterday and we hear it again today.

Last Sunday we heard Matthew's account of the Nativity. On Christmas Eve we heard Luke's story of the birth of Jesus and next week Matthew will tell us of the arrival of the magi. These stories are an attempt to comprehend the mystery of the Incarnation, God with us, Emmanuel. They are an introduction to and explanation of who Jesus was as he was experienced by the early Church. Angels, shepherds, and wise men all come to honor the one John describes as "the true light, which enlightens everyone". Matthew's and Luke's stories are an attempt to express in words what Jesus meant to the 1st century Christian community and what he means to us, the 21st century Christian community.

John's Gospel also attempt to express in words the meaning of the Incarnation, of what it mean that "The Word became flesh and dwelt" or more accurately "tented among us." We do not hear John's prologue with 1st century Jewish ears. We are not steeped in Torah. But John and his community were. John opens his Good News with an allusion to Genesis, an allusion to the beginning, to even before the beginning and then takes his community from the founding narrative which follows out of the creation story – the narrative of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the great narration of liberation, Exodus. They would have heard, when John says, "The Word became flesh and tented among us," an echo of the time God did "tent among them." They

would have known that in Exodus it is in a tent that Moses goes to hear God, to commune, to receive instruction, to listen to the Word.

So John does not tell of angels, shepherds, or wise men. There is no Mary or Joseph, no songs sung by a mother or angels. No aunts. No uncles. No cousin leaping in the womb at Mary's happy tidings. There are no gifts. There is no traveling.

Instead there is a reflection on the Torah and the beginning of witness. John reflects on the Incarnation, on God with us, Emmanuel. God, of course, could have chosen to come among us like Superman, dropping in as if from another planet, to be adopted by Mary and Joseph and raised to adulthood, all the while keeping his power and strength to defeat evil wherever he found it or it found him or he could have wandered in as an adult from the desert like the German hausfrau in *Baghdad Café* to change forever the lives of all she met. Instead, God chose to give up power and to experience human life in its totality – conception to death. God chose to experience birth, weaning, teething, learning to crawl, to walk, to talk, to share with his siblings. God chose to have skinned knees, to learn a trade, and to leave home. God chose to experience joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, feasting and fasting. The Church continues to reflect on this – this giving up of power and all knowledge – think of it – in choosing to be born, in choosing to experience life in its totality, the Word gave up knowing words and like every infant had to learn the names of everything. In choosing to be born, God gave up all power and yet, when Jesus, God with us, Emmanuel, grew to adulthood, all who met him were “astounded” when he “spoke with authority.”ⁱ

The Church continues to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation, whether through the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew, through the ministry narrative of Mark, or through the narrative and theological reflection of John. Let's join in John's narration and reflection, in the poetry and story of the Prologue to John's Good News.

Usually in John narratives precede the reflections. Probably the best known reflection comes after the story of Nicodemus who asked what it means to be born anew. John reflects, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."ⁱⁱ

In the Prologue of the Gospel this pattern is altered. Here the narrative is introduced within the reflection. The narrative is a portion of the testimony of the Baptist. John is asked by people from Jerusalem if he is the Messiah or Elijah come back from heaven or the prophet whose coming was foretold in Deuteronomy. John replies that he is none of these, but he is the one whom Isaiah said would be the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" John says that the one for whom they are waiting, the Messiah, is already among them, as yet unknown, but soon to be revealed.

The reflection on the Torah prepares us for John's, the final prophet's, testimony. The reflection tells us what John will testify to and gives us helps to understand his testimony and his description of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the description which in turn brings Andrew to tell Peter he has "found the Messiah."

The reflection tells us that Jesus is the Word of God, existent before time. The reflection reminds us that God spoke the cosmos into being. In the words of the Psalmist,

"By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth."ⁱⁱⁱ

Through the Word, God brings all creation into being. And this makes sense to us. We know the power of words. We know that words can shape reality, that words are dynamic, that in some sense our words are alive.

Words are our primary method of communication. We long to communicate - with ourselves, with others, with God. Our desire to understand and be understood is so powerful that we teach chimpanzees sign language. We teach parakeets to talk. We listen to the babble of babies, hoping to catch a word. I remember my daughter at seven months, "NNnaa, nnnnaa," and my mother-in-law saying in absolute delight, "She calling for me, 'Nana!'" "Nana" she became, to Nancy and to all her grandchildren. We send signals into space in an attempt to communicate

with life beyond our solar system. We long for a universal language even when we insist on "English only".

It is through words we comprehend the world. It is through words and with words that we express feelings and emotions. We use words to discuss and to debate, to express love and hope and fear, and we use words to pray. When words fail us, we are lost.

But words do not fail God. Through the Word, God continues to communicate with his creation. We read together from the psalm this morning how God

sends out his command to the earth, *and his word runs very swiftly.
and
He declares his word to Jacob, * his statutes and his judgments to Israel.

Isaiah tells us God's word has purpose. That just as

the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater

so God's word goes out and shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which God purposes and succeed in the thing for which God sent it.^{iv}

For John and for us, Jesus is the communicative, creative, purposeful Word through which God speaks to us. It is Jesus who accomplishes God's plan of salvation. We know that when the Psalmist sings,

"He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction,"^v it is Jesus who heals, Jesus who delivers.

Because he is God with us, because he is Emmanuel, because he is the one "close to the Father's heart," it is Jesus who makes God known to us. It is through his words and through his stories that we learn what God's kingdom is. It is through his life that we "see" God, see the glory, full of grace and truth. It is through Jesus, the Word, that we learn what is truth. It is through Jesus,

the Word, we encounter grace. And it is through Jesus and with Jesus, who is Emmanuel, who is God with us, that, in the words of Howard Thurman, we can join in the work of God on earth, knowing that:

"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 flock,
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 others,
To make music in the heart."^{vi}

Amen.

Merry Christmas!

ⁱ Luke 4:32

ⁱⁱ John 3:16

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 33:6

^{iv} Isaiah 55:10-11

^v Psalm 107:20

^{vi} Howard Thurman, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=16319> Howard Thurman (1899 – April 10, 1981) was an influential American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader. He was Dean of Theology and the chapels at Howard University and Boston University for more than two decades, wrote 20 books, and in 1944 helped found the first racially integrated, multicultural church in the United States.