

Christmas 1, Year B
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Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3 Psalm 147:13-21 Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7 John 1:1-18

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ... In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. This is the gospel of Luke, and Luke's telling of the Christmas story that we heard just one week ago. The story is down to earth; Luke gives us images of everyday ancient desert living, of travel, farm hands, a baby in a stable. When I hear Luke's Christ-child story I think of Linus, of the Peanuts/Charlie Brown gang, and of Linus telling the story from a spot-lit stage. Linus, with Luke's words, brings these earth-bound images to life. The Linus child speaks to the child in us, helps us relate to Christ the baby, to fields and towns and angels. Luke's is a Christmas story that we can wrap around ourselves like Linus might wrap himself in his blanket; we can settle into it and listen with wonder. The spotlight is over there, on stage, and we sit at a comfortable viewing distance.

There is no such birth story in John's gospel; there is no baby, no shepherds, angels, or travelers from the far away. John plunges us into creation itself, putting in front of us the co-eternal Jesus, who appears to us after he is present and part of creating everything that there is. It is not a very cuddly story.

From Genesis 1, as translated into Greek (Septuagint):

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.

John's gospel takes us back to this same creation story with the words at the beginning of his gospel:

in the beginning was the Word.

Gospel writer John wants us to know that Jesus' beginning is not in a stable, but in the creation of the world. The God of Genesis, our God of creation and Israel, is the same God who comes to us now in the form of a human being.

Matthew and Luke introduce us first to the humanity of Jesus; their earthy stories do just that. Matthew and Luke do not deny Jesus' divinity; their gospels show us Jesus' divinity, his divine-ness, through his humanity. John emphasizes Jesus' deity, his God-ness, and then reveals that this eternal Word became human flesh. The eternal Word, always existing, *became flesh and lived among us*. "Became flesh" is a rather crude way of talking about being human – Jesus became this "hunk of flesh," right along with the rest of us. "Lived among us," is the verb "tabernacled," and is fabulous imagery. John writes that God became this hunk of human flesh (fully human!) and pitched a tent right there in the midst of us. Even though John begins with Jesus' deity, he clearly expresses Jesus' humanity. Instead of a child on a stage, a baby in a stable, we envision ... what? A campsite? Maybe a trail, or the sea of tents at a Boy Scout Jamboree or a Susan Komen breast cancer walk fund-raiser. This is not passive imagery, but us right there with God.

From the other gospels, we remember this word “tabernacling.” Anyone? Yes, from the mountain top with Peter, James, and John. Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah and the experience is so powerful that Peter says “let’s tabernacle here.” Let’s pitch a tent and stay awhile. We know that Jesus and his friends did not stay on that mountain or in that mountain-top experience; Jesus was laser-focused on his journey to Jerusalem. But Jesus definitely tabernacles with us, not in a tent, but in our everyday lives. Are you ready for that? Living into our faith means that we cannot stay in our theater seats watching the story of Jesus unfold. We cannot box Jesus up with our ornaments and pack him away like the decorations of Christmas time. John wants us to allow the Word of God pitch his tent in our hearts. Bishop Frank Logue writes: “This is risky business. It will always be far easier to confine Jesus to holidays and perhaps Sunday mornings. It will always be far more difficult to invite the light of Christ into every area of your life. Are you ready (are we ready?) for the light of Christ to shine in your darkness? What about the parts of you that you hope no one notices? What about the parts you like to keep tucked under the bed or in the back of the closet, so to speak? Are you ready for the light of Christ to shine there, too?”

The love of God is meant to pitch a tent and stay within you, in every day’s words and actions. We choose – you choose – whether or not to let God’s light, God’s son, into your life on Monday mornings, Friday nights, at the grocery store ... everywhere. We cannot dismantle the Word of God; we are not meant to pack Jesus away like out of season decorations in our homes. We take Jesus upon us and into us, pouring light and hope and grace like waters of baptism that pour forever without drowning, only giving life.

We see God through the Word made flesh, through Jesus, God’s son, who is “full of grace and truth.” Jesus holds both characteristics, at once and always. John 1:17 compares Jesus’ grace and truth with the Law that came through Moses. The Law was, in its own way, itself a good thing. Israel long regarded God’s giving of the Torah to be a gift, a grace in its own way. We in our humanity corrupt the grace underlying the Law. This is what Paul writes about in this little bit from Galatians; that we use the Law as our disciplinarian, our way of judging others. Faith – Jesus – came to free us from using the Law as truth without grace. On our own, we apply “truth” not so much to our lives, but to other’s lives; we can be brutal in seeing the speck in someone else’s eye while overlooking the log in our own. That is truth without grace. We need the person and God, the humanity and divinity, in Jesus to show us, over and over again, how to pour grace upon others – grace upon grace upon grace while shining truth in Christ as a welcoming beacon, a welcoming without our judgment. Probably Jesus is the only one who can hold grace and truth together, not in tension, but in concert with one another; his example is ideal of tabernacling grace and truth in our everyday lives.

In a few words, John tells us who Jesus is, stretches us to think beyond Jesus’ beginnings as a baby, stretches us to think about the creation of the world and the ongoing creation of God in the world. We begin again with Jesus, enjoying him for a few moments as a vulnerable child. Next week we begin a season of revealing Jesus’ ministry in the world, beginning with his baptism. For now, contemplate what beginning is stirring in you. Ask the question every day: Creator God, living Word made flesh, dwelling among us, within us, what will you have us do? How can we best shine your grace today?