

**The First Sunday after Christmas – Year A
30 December 2007
St. Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri**

John 1:1-18

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

In the last seven days – on the 4th Sunday of Advent and on Christmas Eve - we have read accounts about Jesus’ birth from the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. And, next week at the Feast of the Epiphany, we will return to the story from Matthew’s Gospel.

A virgin named Mary, Joseph the man to whom she is engaged, a birth in a stable and a baby in a manger, shepherds on a hillside, angels singing in the Galilean sky, and - next week - wise men from the East coming to worship the infant Jesus.

The writers of Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels have charmed and inspired us with these beautiful stories, and the characters they have presented to us are all around us at this time of year - in our churches and homes as part of our nativity sets, on Christmas cards, and in our children’s pageants.

But, what we have read this morning from the Gospel of John is different. Its approach to the story of Jesus doesn’t begin with the story of Jesus’ birth on earth.

For the Gospel of John, the beginning was not a particular event in time like Jesus’ birth – as in Matthew and Luke. Instead the beginning was outside the calculations of time and place. The beginning was in eternity, in the cosmic pre-existence of the Word with God.

What we have heard this morning, the first eighteen verses of John's Gospel – sometimes called the “prologue” to the Gospel - are central to our Christian understanding of the incarnation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Word became flesh and lived among us.

These verses tell us that Jesus was the incarnate Word of God. God once for all made human in the person of Jesus Christ.

No other New Testament writer places the incarnation at the center of its theological world in quite the same way as John does. And, these verses from John's Gospel are clearly the most unambiguous affirmation of the divinity of Christ in the New Testament.

Incarnation means that on the first Christmas in a stable in Bethlehem, the human Jesus was God come to us in human form. And, in a few minutes, we will affirm our belief in the incarnation, as we do each Sunday, in the words of the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...

God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,

begotten, not made, of one being with the father.

John's expression of the incarnation is beautiful, poetic. The Nicene Creed's expression of the incarnation is the historic affirmation of our faith and of the faith of billions of others. It's so familiar, that most of us can probably say it from memory.

But, what does the incarnation really mean for us in our actual day-to-day living?

Many, many words have been spoken and written in answer to this question. And, I'm sure that I could not possibly fully answer this question in one sermon (or even two or three sermons). But, let me suggest two things that I think the incarnation means for us.

First of all, the incarnation means that we humans now have a way of understanding of who God is.

For the writer of John's Gospel, the Gospel story – the Good News – is about the very character of God and how God makes Godself known to the world through the life and death of Jesus.

For John, the person of Jesus provided unique and unprecedented access to God because Jesus shared God's very character and identity. And it was as the Word made flesh that Jesus brought God fully to the world.

Jesus didn't simply speak God's words and do God's works. No, Jesus did those things because he was God's word and work in the world. Jesus' words and works, all of his life and death, made God known in the world.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.

In the miracle of Christmas, God chose to put Godself in an image that we humans could understand. God took on human flesh to be visible to human eyes. God took on a human voice so

that we could hear with our human ears and used human language that was accessible to our human ways of knowing.

And, this means that we humans now have a chance to glimpse more deeply and more fully into the very mystery of God, not because of us or anything we have done, but because of the gift of revelation that came that first Christmas.

The other implication of the incarnation is that we humans have the assurance that not only can we understand God better, but that God now can understand us. God chose not to be remote and distant from us. But, God chose to be one of us.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.

Literally, in Jesus, God made God's dwelling place with us. In Jesus, God pitched God's tent with us.

The most powerful expression I've ever heard of this particular aspect of Christmas is in a German play written after World War II, which seems to capture the mystery of the incarnation. The play, "The Sign of Jonah," was written by Guenter Rutenborn, a Lutheran pastor.

The atrocities of the war – particularly the Holocaust - were on everyone's minds. And the question of the play was, "Who is to blame?"

Was it Hitler? Or, the munitions manufacturers who financed Hitler? Or, were the apathetic German people to blame?

No, the characters in the play reply - God is to blame. God created the world. God made the world to be what it is.

And, so in the play, God is brought down to the stage and is put in the dock. God is tried and found guilty for the crime of creation.

The judge says, "The crime is so severe that there is going to have to be the worst of sentences. I hereby sentence God to have to live on this earth as a human being."

And, three archangels are then given the task of carrying out the sentence.

The first archangel walks to the end of the stage and says, "I'm going to see to it that when God serves the sentence that God knows what it's like to be obscure and to be poor. To be born on the backside of nowhere with a peasant girl for a mother. There will be suspicion and shame about his birth, and he will live as a Jew in a Jew-hating world.

The second archangel says, "I'm going to see to it that when God serves the sentence as a human being that God knows what it is like to fail and to suffer disappointment. No one will

ever understand what he is trying to do. He will hear angry voices around him and be rejected in every way possible.”

And, the third archangel says, “I’m going to see to it that God knows what it is like to suffer. When God serves the sentence as a human being, I’m going to see that he has all kinds of physical pain. At the end of his life, he will be executed in the most painful way possible, without friends around to comfort him.”

And with that the three archangels disappear from the stage.

And, it suddenly dawns on the audience watching the play that God has already served that sentence. God has already lived as a human being on this earth. God freely chose to be one of us – to pitch God’s tent with us.

God does know what it is like to live as one of us, which means there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can face as human beings living on earth that is going to be strange or unfamiliar to God.

The great Christmas message of the incarnation is that God became one of us so that we could understand who God is and so that we could know with every fiber of our being that God understands who we are.

And that is very Good News indeed! AMEN.