

John 1:1-5, 10-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

“Full of Grace and Truth”

Bromleigh McCleneghan

24 December 2009

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Through the course of our worship together this evening, we have heard the story of a holy night told. We have heard from the prophet Isaiah, whose poetry has challenged us, whose words have prepared us to look for, to long for a Messiah. We have heard of the Angel appearing to Joseph, proclaiming that Emmanuel, the one the world has been waiting for will be born to none other than his very own fiancé. We have heard of that trek to Bethlehem, of the night in the inn, the shepherds on the hill, the angels in their glory. We have heard the story.

And it is a beloved story... for me, it was the first big chunk of bible verses – Luke, Chapter 2 – that I ever committed to memory. It wasn't intentional, either – it was hearing them read, in church, at home, from the mouth of Linus in a *Charlie Brown Christmas*. Over and over again. Christians know this story.

But now, from the prologue to the Gospel of John, we hear eight verses of fairly dense theology. Jesus is not just the child of Bethlehem, but the Word of God, who has been with God since the beginning of time. He is the light of the world, he is the Word made flesh.

These words strike us in their beauty and their strangeness – or, if we have been Christians for awhile, perhaps their meaning has ceased to penetrate our imaginations. Perhaps we have ceased to wonder about what these beautiful, mysterious verses really tell us about God, or tell us about the world.

Christians have a tendency to speak of the things that God does on this dark and holy night – of the way things have changed – that *now* God's love is here, that *now* God loves even the meekest and mildest... whereas before.. .not so much. But John wants us to know that Jesus Christ – God with us – has always been a part of God – has always been a part of how God longs to relate to us. God has always been present – the Word that is spoken is the Word that brings Creation into being, the Love that is so big that it cannot be contained in some distant heaven, that creates human beings in the first place – this is the same love that we see in the birth of the Christ child this night. Heaven cannot hold him... and it never could.

It may well be hard for us to get our heads around this. It is for me. Christian theology is often like this. It's not trying to be difficult – but we're trying to put the greatest and holiest of mysteries into words. Of course we're going to fumble... and, if we are smart, after we fumble a bit trying to explain these

mysteries as logic problems, we'll turn back to story, to song, to poetry...

How is it that something that has always been true is proclaimed as good news this night?

How is it that each year we celebrate a birth that happened over 2000 years ago as though it is occurring for the first time?

This is the nature of God, I think – that God is always present, but also, always breaking into our lives, into our world in new ways... And we, the people of God, are always changing – our world is always in need of new evidence that God is present here. We need to hear the story told again. We need to hear it so often that it becomes a part of the way we see and understand the world. We need to hear it so often that it begins to shape our very hearts and lives. We need to hear it so often, because we are called to tell it ourselves.

You have to know a story well in order to tell it, and as the people of God, we are called to tell *this* story, to proclaim the Word of God anew – so that we may be convicted and emboldened by it, and so that we might share it with others.

Now, of course, the danger of telling the same story over and over is that it will get old... that we will forget what made it so shocking. We will forget its life-changing, world-altering beauty

and truth. We will forget to look for the light of God's grace. We will forget that the Gospel is a story about the God who has always been, and the God who is now, and the God who will always be.

Fiona, our two year old, has checked out a children's book from the public library recently telling the story of that first Christmas night and we've been reading it a lot. Or, rather, Josh was reading it a lot, because I had a cough for the last few weeks. I was mostly falling asleep in the rocking chair while he read... as I've mentioned, I've heard the story before, the plot was failing to keep me riveted.

But as I've recovered, I've taken on the story reading responsibilities... and I found something new, something interesting... it wasn't actually in the words, but in the pictures. There's one in this edition, in which Mary and Joseph are going from inn to inn looking for a place to stay, and I could see, for the first time ever, how weary this woman was. How tired, how very *done* she was with pregnancy, how very, very much she wanted to get off that darn donkey right that very minute. I saw for the first time how the stable was a very last resort... that the sweet smelling hay was better than another sort of smelling hay... but that it was far from the best option. It was the only way she could just stop for the night.

As Christians, we're called to know the story – but to see it always anew. To always be, in the words of one poet, “astonished by the stable.”

For this is the miracle of Christmas, the wonder of the everlasting God... that the Lord of Heaven and Earth comes to dwell even here, here with us of all places. And this is the call, the work of Christmas which we must now engage – to tell this story wherever we may be, to see the truth and beauty of God's abundant grace, whether we are in a beautiful, candlelit sanctuary, or somewhere we'd really rather avoid...

I love this Christmas poem, whose title I referenced earlier, by the poet Leslie Leyland Fields... because it reminds me of what is new here, each year....

"Let the Stable Still Astonish"

Leslie Leyland Fields

Let the stable still astonish:
Straw-dirt floor, dull eyes
Dusty flanks of donkeys, oxen;
crumbling, crooked walls;
No bed to carry that pain,
And then, the child,

Rag-wrapped, laid to cry
In a trough
Who would have chosen this?
Who would have said, "Yes,
Let the God of all the heavens and earth
Be born here, in this place?"
Who but the same God
Who stands in the darker, fouler rooms of our hearts
and says, "Yes,
let the God of Heaven and Earth be born here --
in *this* place."

Friends, the Good News this Christmas night is that the God who is and was and ever shall be chooses to come into our world, even into *this* place, even into a stable. The ancient hope meets the eternal joy. Our light is come. Amen.