

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

The Nativity of Our Lord; Christmas Day (Year A)

December 25, 2017



Pastor David J. Risendal

www.OneLittleWord.org

drisendal@StPLC.org

facebook | Dave Risendal

Twitter: drisendal

Saint Peter Lutheran Church

9300 East Belleview Avenue
Greenwood Village, CO 80111

voice: 303/770-9300

fax: 303/770-9301

www.StPLC.org

facebook.com/StPLC

Lessons

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12]

St. John 1:1-14

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you gave us your only Son
to take on our human nature
and to illumine the world with your light.
By your grace adopt us as your children
and enlighten us with your Spirit,
through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

*God in human flesh
transcendent and immanent
that we might have life*

Sermon

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Amen.

Merry Christmas to you. And can I just say how grateful I am that you all are here? It's been a lot of worship this week, hasn't it? I'm seeing faces this morning that I saw this past Wednesday evening, and yesterday morning, and yesterday night. Of all of these worship services, this one has to be my favorite. In the quiet of this morning, we find time to contemplate what this is all about. Not just the details of Jesus' birth, but its implications. What does it mean to call this one Immanuel — God among us? What does it mean to think of him as Messiah — the one who saves? How does his birth among us shape the way we experience God?

¹ Romans 1:7, 1st Corinthians 1:3, 2nd Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1st Thessalonians 1:1, 2nd Thessalonians 1:2, Philemon 3; New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Last night we talked about the simplicity of the Christmas story. How in the humble surroundings of the Bethlehem manger, and in the presence of a poor traveling couple from Nazareth, squeezed into that setting with an unnamed crowd of shepherds, fellow travelers and vagrants, the presence of God made its way into our world. We talked about the impact it had on everyone who was involved. The bystanders were amazed. Mary treasured what she heard, and pondered what it meant. The shepherds returned to the fields, glorifying and praising God. It was an extraordinary night — hearts touched and lives changed by this simple, unassuming story. A newborn baby. A humble couple. A common manger. And the presence of something powerfully sacred. Silent night; holy night indeed!

This morning feels so different. Part of it is the time of day, the beautiful music, the quieter assembly. But a significant difference, for me, is the Gospel reading. Yesterday evening we spent time with St. Luke the storyteller. This beautiful birth narrative probably would have gone over better if we could have convinced Linus to come and read it for us, blanket in hand. With Schroeder playing in the background. It is a story with which we can identify. After hearing it for so many years, I could almost imagine myself shivering in the background with the shepherds, watching it all play out.

Now, this morning, it seems that we have shifted to Carl Sagan the master of extravagance. In these opening, poetic verses of St. John, the focus is on the God of Creation, who formed billions and billions of stars, who was present in the Big Bang, who brought to life everything that is. It is beautiful, poetic language, of course, and that is stirring in its own right. But the story itself is so grand; so magnificent; so overpowering that it can seem to soar far above us and beyond us, while we yearn to somehow connect with it.

It is sometimes hard to imagine that these two evangelists are telling the same story, much less that their accounts are both included in the same Bible. Perhaps this is testimony to how hard it is for someone who had come to know Jesus to put their experience into words. It would be years before the church formalized its language, and agreed on specific ways to speak of God who is at the same time three and one, and Jesus who is at the same time human and divine. But in these two stories, preserved for us by St. Luke and St. John, we are invited into the conversation. Not just about who God is, and how to speak most thoughtfully about that. But about what God means to us, and how Jesus welcomes us into the story of God in a new and powerful way.

This, of course, is where these two stories begin to converge. John may not seem to know much about the details of that first Christmas morn, but he does know about the heart and soul of the Incarnation; that because Jesus, the very embodiment of God's grace, takes on human flesh we are granted the opportunity to know the unknowable God. And we are able to recognize ourselves as those children who are loved by God. This is the gift of Christmas that John's Gospel bears to us: a new identity, a new opportunity, a new humanity, all through God in Christ. The word has become flesh, and it has dwelt among us, and John would

have us know and love his glory; the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ²

Pastor William Flippin tells of a Chinese Restaurant in Columbus, Georgia where he lives. It is called Chef Lee's. He claims to eat there because of its world class food, but he also enjoys the fact that inside the restaurant is a coy pond. This pond contains an assortment of tropical fish with colors he describes as "so extraordinary that only God's personal coloring set could have decorated them."

It takes a lot of work to care for a coy pond. The owner monitors the oxygen and nitrate levels and the ammonia content. The water is filtered. Vitamins, antibiotics and sulfa drugs must be pumped in. The fish have to be fed regularly.

Now with all that care and attention, you would think that the fish would adore the owner. But they don't. Anytime he comes around, they dart away in fear. The owner is like a god to those fish, too big to comprehend, too frightening to love. The only way to change that would be for the owner to somehow become a fish himself and communicate how much these fish are loved and appreciated. ³

St. John's Gospel announces that, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Apart from the Incarnation, we too might be tempted to think of God as too big to comprehend and too frightening to love. How many stories are there in the Hebrew Bible of people who wondered if they could even survive the experience of glimpsing God's face? So the powerful word of God that spoke all of creation into being becomes flesh. Once too big to comprehend and too frightening to love, it willingly enters fully into humanity. The pangs of hunger, the trauma of thirst, the agony of loneliness, the shame of nakedness, the struggle of poverty, the humility of blasphemy... God takes all of this on in order that we might glimpse the splendor of eternal glory, and receive the gifts of love and grace. God becomes not only great, and mighty, and far beyond, but also loving and caring and intimate and near. It is hard to imagine that both are true, but St. Luke and St. John help us.

And so we remember, and celebrate. From the simple tale of a birth in Bethlehem, to the expansive vision of God's creating word. From the word proclaimed in the scriptures, to the real presence of Christ received in the meal. From the declaration of absolution in the liturgy, to the witness we share with our neighbors. The babe of Bethlehem. The word become flesh. The incarnate God, who enters into our lives, and draws us into this story.

Merry Christmas, friends. May the presence of God, crying out with hunger in the manger, and speaking the universe into existence, be present in your lives today, bringing you faith and hope and joy and peace. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

² Thanks to friend, brother in faith, teacher and pastor, David Lose, for this understanding of John's birth narrative. December 25, 2010. <http://www.WorkingPreacher.org>

³ Illustration courtesy of By Reverend William E. Flippin, Jr. December 18, 2011. <https://www.HuffingtonPost.com>

Gospel Lesson; English Text ⁴

1.1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who 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. ⁵

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

1.1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. ¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ⁶

First Lesson; English Text:

52.7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
 who brings good news, who announces salvation,
 who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
 8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy;

⁴ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/Lectionary.

⁵ St. John 1:1-14, New Revised Standard Version Bible, op. cit.

⁶ St. John 1:1-14, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

- for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion.
 9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem;
 for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.
 10 The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations;
 and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. ⁷

Second Lesson; English Text:

^{1.1} Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

- ⁵ [For to which of the angels did God ever say,
 "You are my Son;
 today I have begotten you"?

Or again,

"I will be his Father,
 and he will be my Son"?

- ⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
 "Let all God's angels worship him."
⁷ Of the angels he says,
 "He makes his angels winds,
 and his servants flames of fire."
⁸ But of the Son he says,
 "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
 and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
 therefore God, your God, has anointed you
 with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."
¹⁰ And,
 "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
 and the heavens are the work of your hands;
¹¹ they will perish, but you remain;
 they will all wear out like clothing;
¹² like a cloak you will roll them up,
 and like clothing they will be changed.
 But you are the same,
 and your years will never end."] ⁸

⁷ Isaiah 52:7-10, New Revised Standard Version Bible, op. cit.

⁸ Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12], New Revised Standard Version Bible, op. cit.

Second Lesson; Greek Text:

1.1 Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλοι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ²ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ, ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας· ³ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ, φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ, καθαρισμόν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς, ⁴τοσοῦτω κρείπτων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσω διαφορῶτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.

⁵ [Τίνοι γὰρ εἶπεν ποτε τῶν ἀγγέλων
υἱὸς μου εἶ σύ,

ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκα σε;

καὶ πάλιν·

ἐγὼ ἔσομαι αὐτῷ εἰς πατέρα,

καὶ αὐτὸς ἔσται μοι εἰς υἱόν;

⁶ ὅταν δὲ πάλιν εἰσαγάγῃ τὸν πρωτότοκον εἰς τὴν οἰκουμένην, λέγει καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ. ⁷καὶ πρὸς μὲν τοὺς ἀγγέλους λέγει

ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα

καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα,

⁸ πρὸς δὲ τὸν υἱόν

ὁ θρόνος σου ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ

αἰῶνος,

καὶ ἡ ῥάβδος τῆς εὐθύτητος ῥάβδος τῆς

βασιλείας σου.

⁹ ἠγάπησας δικαιοσύνην καὶ ἐμίσησας ἀνομίαν
διὰ τοῦτο ἔχρισεν σε ὁ θεὸς

ὁ θεὸς σου

ἔλαιον ἀγαλλιάσεως παρὰ τοὺς μετόχους σου.

¹⁰ καί·

σὺ κατ' ἀρχάς, κύριε, τὴν γῆν

ἐθεμελίωσας,

καὶ ἔργα τῶν χειρῶν σου εἰσιν οἱ

οὐρανοί·

¹¹ αὐτοὶ ἀπολοῦνται, σὺ δὲ διαμένεις,

καὶ πάντες ὡς ἱμάτιον παλαιωθήσονται,

¹² καὶ ὡσεὶ περιβόλαιον ἐλίξεις αὐτούς,

ὡς ἱμάτιον καὶ ἀλλαγήσονται·

σὺ δὲ ὁ αὐτὸς εἶ

καὶ τὰ ἔτη σου οὐκ ἐκλείουσιν.] ⁹

⁹ Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12], The Greek New Testament, op. cit.