

The Way We Know God

John 1:1-18

December 27, 2009

I.

Today we come to the end of a theological journey that began on the first Sunday in Advent. During the last five weeks we explored the earthly history of Jesus Christ. Today we consider his heavenly aspects. During the last five weeks we heard about how Jesus got here and what it means. Today we think about where he came from, and what it means.

And it's appropriate to hear this reading on a day we will baptize two people and receive them into our community of faith. Just as the reading describes Christ's descent from the heavenly realms, so also in baptism does the Holy Spirit enter into us and seal us as Christ's own forever.

So let's start with the beginning, and two books in the Bible open with the phrase, "In the beginning." They are the first words in the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, and also the first words in last Gospel in the New Testament, John, which we heard today.

We all know that "the beginning" in the Book of Genesis describes the creation of the universe. John's Gospel, however, starts even before creation. He viewed the beginning as eternity in the past. Just as eternity can reach indefinitely forward, it also can stretch endlessly back.

And the stories in both books start in eternity beyond time and space, and both stories then come into time and space. Genesis describes the creation of the universe from the formless void, and John proclaims the birth of Jesus from the eternal Word.

Let's look more closely at how John presented this. First, he stepped out of this world and told us that God has existed eternally, and that the Word also has existed eternally as God. Then he moved into the world and explained how this eternal Word came to live among us through Jesus Christ, who was both fully human and fully divine.

This means that the powerful and sovereign God who was universally revealed to all people in the Book of Genesis is the very same loving and merciful God who has been revealed to us now in Jesus Christ. Just as we look at creation and sense God, we also look to Christ and know God.

II.

Let me read just the first three verses of today's reading again, along with verse fourteen. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

What a lyrical and mystical statement! At first glance we might be tempted to dismiss these passages as philosophical or abstract. We might look for more user-friendly stories in the Bible. We might think that this part of Scripture does not speak to us as some other parts do.

I would like to suggest just the opposite. John's Gospel tells about the greatest drama ever to happen—God coming to earth. And John's version is not just the usual Christmas story with which we all are familiar, it also adds meaning and significance to that Christmas story because John explains exactly who that baby in the manger was.

For example, the traditional account in the other Gospels emphasizes the human side of Jesus' birth. We are familiar with these Christmas stories in the Gospels and Matthew and Luke. We can imagine them. We see them on Christmas cards. There are pictures of shepherds, the manger, and the star of Bethlehem. Most of our Christmas carols are based on Matthew or Luke.

John's Gospel, however, is harder to visualize. Christmas cards usually don't reflect this more cosmic aspect of the Christmas story. Nevertheless, it reminds us that this fully human baby also was fully God. He was eternally divine in heaven before he became also human on earth.

III.

In some ways John's proclamation of this Good News in Christ in today's reading reminds me of the story of the fellow who visited one of his friends, who was a college music teacher. The fellow walked in his friend's office, and in a somewhat offhand way said, "So, professor, what's the good news for today?"

The music teacher didn't say a thing. He just picked up a tuning fork, struck it with a mallet, and produced a tone. Then he said, "The good news is that was middle C, it was middle C yesterday, it will be middle C tomorrow, and it will be middle C forever. And that's the good news."

The same kind of good news is in John's Gospel. It tells us that Jesus Christ always has been and always will be. It was the good news yesterday, and will be tomorrow, and next year, and forever.

And this good news is at the heart of John's Gospel. Jesus Christ came to us that we might come to him. In Christ we meet God as God wants us to see him. When we look at Jesus we see that his entire ministry was characterized by his love for humanity and by his efforts to redeem sinners, both in his life and in his death. To see this in Jesus is to see it in God.

I once heard a well-known preacher say that if God wanted to communicate with cows, Jesus would have been a cow. And if God wanted to communicate with birds, Jesus would have been a bird. But God wanted to communicate with us, and so he sent his Son to be with us as a human being.

Now, I personally think that if God wants to communicate with cows or birds, he can do it. After all, he created them. But that preacher's example makes a useful point.

And the point is that in Christ we meet God as God wants us to know him. Jesus brought us face to face with God, not in some distant or abstract sense, but in a personal sense that shows us God's divine love. Jesus showed us what God is like.

IV.

And in addition to telling us who Jesus was, today's Gospel also extended to what he did. It said that "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

What did John mean by darkness? Certainly it was something more than the absence of light. At some times the absence of light can be good, and not something to be overcome. Our natural cycle of day and night is part of creation. In the same way cold is the absence of heat, and silence is the absence of sound, and they aren't always bad.

So, darkness in the sense of John's Gospel means more than just the absence of something. It refers to a thing that has its own existence; its own reality. And that thing is the work of evil in the world that produces sin in our lives. Jesus was the Prince of Peace born into a world that also is home to the Prince of Darkness. And the light of Jesus overcame those dark works of evil.

Jesus as the light also worked in two other ways. Because he was both God and man, he was both the divine light and the worldly light. As the divine light he revealed God. He showed us who God is, how God loves us, and declared that we should love God. Jesus could do this because he was divine and knew God intimately.

But as the worldly light he shined on us and called us to love each other. That light shows us how to live in Christian faith in the world. Jesus could do this because he was human and knew us intimately.

V.

Another story illustrates this point. I told it two years ago, but it's worth repeating. It starts with a farmer who didn't believe in God, but his wife did believe. One snowy Christmas Eve, his wife was preparing to go to church and asked him to come and hear the story of Jesus' birth. But he said, "That's nonsense! If God exists, why would he lower himself to come to Earth as a man?"

So she left and he stayed home. A little later the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard, and the man sat down to relax in front of the fireplace.

Then he heard a loud thump; something had hit the window. He looked out, but couldn't see anything. When the snow let up he went outside and saw that a flock of wild geese had gotten lost in the storm. They just flew around in circles, blindly and aimlessly.

The man felt sorry for the geese, and thought his barn would be a good place for them to stay for the night. So he opened the barn doors wide, hoping the Geese would notice and go inside. But they just fluttered around and stayed outside.

Then he tried to get their attention, but that scared them away. He got some bread, broke it up, and made a bread crumb trail to the barn. They still didn't catch on. He even got behind them and tried to shoo them toward the barn, but that didn't work either. Nothing could get them to go into the barn.

Then he realized that the geese wouldn't follow a human. "If only I were a goose, then I could save them," he said out loud, and then had an idea. He got one of his own geese from the barn, and released it behind the flock of wild geese. His goose flew straight through the flock and back into the barn, and one-by-one, the other geese saw and followed it to safety.

He stood silently for a moment as the words he had spoken replayed in his mind. "If only I were a goose, then I could save them!" Then he thought about what he had said to his wife earlier. "Why would God want to be like us?"

Suddenly it all made sense. That is exactly what God had done. We were like the geese; blind, lost, perishing. And God sent Jesus Christ to become like us so he could show us the way and save us.

As the winds died down, his soul became quiet and he understood why Christ had come. Years of doubt and disbelief vanished with the storm. He fell to his knees in the snow, and prayed his first prayer. "Thank You, God, for coming to get me out of the storm!"

VI.

Today's reading challenges us to reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ. If we think he was only a man, or a great teacher or a prophet, then we might as well forget about him. There will be nothing there to help us when we need it, and as only a man he could not offer us salvation.

But if he is God, as he claimed to be and as John told us today, then we are called to yield our lives to him. We are called to worship and serve him, and live our lives as he taught us, secure in our Christian hope of eternal life. God wants us to believe in him in the way that he believes in us, because he came to us so that we might come to him. *Amen.*