

John 1:1-3a, 10-18 2 Christmas 1.2.25 Bill Uetrict

Doesn't it seem like it was just a little while ago that we were oohing and ahing over a little baby, born in a cow barn in a no-count town named Bethlehem. And I could swear that it was only a week ago that we were talking about this baby growing up, hanging out with the bigwigs in Jerusalem's temple. We were saying, quoting Kenny Chesney, "Don't blink," because before you know it those kids are getting taller, becoming their own people, challenging their parents. Wasn't it just a week ago that we were saying that the little Jesus boy was increasing in wisdom and in years, growing up "in divine and human favor"?

Can't we just linger with that for a while? Can't we hear a little more about his teenage years, his graduation, his heading off to college? Can't we just stay with the mundane a bit, the stuff that we can really relate to?

The church doesn't let us do that. The lectionary, that list of readings that we preachers are given for each week, seems intent on moving us from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the particular to the universal, from the local to the global.

The gospel writer John has no interest in stories about births and babies or anxious parents. He has no need to take us to Bethlehem or even to Jerusalem and its temple. He wants to take us back before creation. He wants you to imagine the time before the Big Bang. He wants you to reflect on the meaning of it all, the meaning of creation, the meaning of this Jesus event.

"In the beginning was the Word," John says. "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

Whoa! That sounds like Genesis all over again. That sounds big. That sounds cosmic. What happened to little old Jesus in little old Bethlehem? What happened to "Silent Night, Holy Night?" (sung) What

happened to “O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie?” What happened to the cutesy, to the tender, to the particular, to the relatable? Oh, we moved so quickly from a baby born in a cow stall to the Word that was from the beginning!

But truthfully, what John is doing is not intended to take away the relatability of it all. In fact, in some ways, he is trying to tell us that this Jesus story, this Jesus event is all about God’s relating to ordinary human life. Yet John needs to say that in a fancy way. I suspect that John, whoever he was, was very well educated and was increasingly aware of Greek culture, a culture that loved to think ethereally, think big, loved to probe the mysteries of life and creation. Let’s be honest. Some folks from this culture struggled to keep their feet on the ground.

But John’s message is primarily that God’s feet are on the ground. “And the Word became flesh, and lived among us,” literally, tabernacled or tented among us. This Word that was before creation, the Word that worked alongside of God to produce the “Big Bang,” became a part of history, became flesh and blood, moved into our campground, our neighborhood. And it is a thing of beauty. It is glorious. In Jesus, the Word made flesh, we get to see God’s glory, the kind of glory that a father experiences in his only son. The glory of God oozes into and through Jesus, the one the church calls “the Son.” In other words, if you want to know what God is up to in the world, you have to look at Jesus. He is the Son in and through whom the glory of God shines.

It is now time to talk about what all of this Christmas stuff means. It’s not time simply to ooh and ahh at a baby. It’s not time just to watch this baby grow up. It’s time to think about who Jesus is and what his *whole* life means for me, for you, and for the whole world.

What we are talking about here today is not just about what happened in Bethlehem or even Jerusalem. What we are talking about is something that has meaning for every place and every time. The

Word before creation came into being became flesh. The God of creation is deeply embedded in all things, among all people, and in every time. God is not at a distance. God penetrates all things, particularly a human life we call Jesus.

The author of Ephesians says something similar today when he claims, “With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the *mystery* of his will, according to the good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up *all things* in him, things in heaven and on earth.” What is going on in Bethlehem and Jerusalem has to do with all things, all people.

One of the challenges of being human is our tendency to want to stay in Bethlehem. And don’t get me wrong. Bethlehem is a good place. We all start from somewhere. In fact, it is very good to start in some place that is very good. It’s good to start with a good family, a good town, a good nation. A lot of people who don’t start well often find it hard doing well. You need your own little tribe. You are a human being not in general but in particular. You have your own skin color. You have your own sexual identity. You have your own folks you hang out with. You have a nation that you have a special fondness for. You have ideas and political commitments that are important to you. That’s all good! We have to start someplace.

But don’t think for one minute that God is limited to Bethlehem, to Muskegon, to your little tribe, to University of Michigan fans, to your ideas, to your religious affiliation. I hate to tell you, God ain’t a Lutheran, even though I am sure he is tempted to become one! The God we meet in Jesus, the Word become flesh, is the God of the Big Bang, the God of all creation, the God of all people and all things.

The mystery that the author of Ephesians says has been revealed in Christ (Jesus now has become “Christ”) is the mystery that all along God desired that Jews and Gentiles--and for the author of Ephesians that is *all* people--be one. We needed to start with the particular story,

the story of Israel, but all along, the author of Ephesians is saying, God didn't have God's eyes simply focused on Israel. It wasn't about Israel all along. Although God's purpose was hidden (it's often hard for us to see outside of our little experience, our little tribe), it was operative all along. And in Christ, the eternal Word, God's purpose was revealed. And that purpose was that all might be one.

In some ways, I think that is what John is saying when he claims: "From [Christ's] fullness we have all received *grace upon grace*." In Christ, the Word made flesh, we receive an abundance of grace, grace that cascades over all things and all people, grace that is enough for a whole world. After all, "God so loved the *world*, [everything and everybody,] that he gave his only Son." In Jesus, we experience the very heart of God.

It's obviously true that "no one has ever seen God." But in the Word made flesh, in the Son who is close to the Father's heart, God has been made known. In Jesus, what God has been up to from the very beginning, has been fully revealed. In Jesus, the promises of God for the whole creation have taken up residence in a human being, have walked among us. And those promises are a matter of grace upon grace, love heaped upon all things and all people.

You know, I wasn't quite ready to leave behind Bethlehem. I wanted to linger with the growing-up child. But sometimes you need the big picture. Sometimes you need to be transported to the time before the Big Bang. Sometimes you need to find yourself lost in the mystery of the promises of God, the promises that are not just for you and your people, but for everybody and everything.