

Religious Experience and the Word of God
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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life; and this light is the light of the world. This light shines in the darkness; and the darkness has not overcome it. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world knew Him not. He came to His own; and His own received Him not. But as many as did receive Him, who believed in His Name, He gave the power to become children of God, which were born not of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have beheld His glory, glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. [John 1: 1-14]

Let's begin with a word of prayer. Almighty Father, we celebrate the birth of the babe in Bethlehem, not because of a misplaced arrogance that would lead us to think that there is something intrinsically worthy in our make-up as human beings that would make us best fit to embody your cosmic preeminence, but because of the revealing light which this babe's life sheds on what it means to encounter your presence in the most unsuspecting places, on what it means to live your will through humble service, and on what it means to find true life by walking in his steps. This is our prayer, our hope and our commitment, in Jesus' name. Amen

Christmas is truly a generous season that creates heightened expectations and unparalleled joy as persons of every shape, size, and persuasion join in the economic bonanza that has been brought into being with our traditions of gift-giving, shoulder-to-shoulder shopping, and a host of other holiday celebrations. Let's face it.

Christmas has far exceeded anything Christians may have originally intended. Folks from Main Street to Wall Street have benefited from the increasingly inclusive mandate that gets almost everybody in the holiday spirit. Jews can join in with Hanukkah; Moslems, with Ramadan; African-Americans have created Kwanzaa; even avowed atheists have gotten in the act by celebrating the holy days of the Winter Solstice. Greeting cards have become religiously generic, with 'happy holidays' now preferred to the more traditional 'Merry Christmas'. Something very important may be slipping away with this movement away from a focus on the real reason for this blessed season, at least where Christians are concerned.

I'd like to explore this issue a bit further this morning. When I was studying at Notre Dame, we had a budding rivalry with the prestigious University of Chicago. They had the head-lining names in Ethics of the 70's; but we had a younger faculty who would become the head-liners in the 90's. The formal arguments between us had to do with how Christian you needed to be in order to be really Christian. Notre Dame, a Roman Catholic University, was quite comfortable insisting that getting a handle on Christian convictions was essential to the task of learning how to live the Christian life.

Chicago was awash in the world of modern science, and focused less on God and more on what humans could study scientifically, namely, religious experience. They

called their academic discipline a Religious Studies Department because they were studying the phenomenon of religion. Ours was called a Theology Department, which signaling, quite appropriately as far as we were concerned, that religion was a response to something more fundamental, namely, the revelation of God. The point here is that the reality of God should take precedence over our fascination with the diversity we find in religious experience.

There is a significant distinction to be made between the celebration of Christmas as a "religious" holiday and the doctrine of the Incarnation as a "theological" proclamation. Christmas Eve was a time for warm fuzzies, focusing on the benefits God offers those who open their hearts to His love, invitingly embodied in the birth of the Baby Jesus. Christmas is about the gifts God desires to share with us - the assurance of God's love while on earth, and the promises of God's life after death. The Incarnation, by contrast, is not about us. It isn't even about the Baby Jesus. It is about the Crucified Christ, whose life of sacrifice and service is proclaimed to be the revelation of what God's life for us looks like, the revelation of what our life for God should look like.

For a while, it became popular to think of our doctrine of Incarnation as a statement about us. You know the thinking. Human beings were just a little lower than the gods. Of all forms of life found on earth, of all forms of life found in the universe, human beings were most worthy of wearing the clothes of divinity for the sake of revealing what God was like. Some analysts have observed that humans are uniquely endowed with the ability to reason; others, that we are uniquely endowed with the capacity to choose, to count, or to love. And these are qualities, therefore, that reveal what we need to know about God. The ancient Greeks said it best when, in trying to capture the mystery of incarnation, they wrote that "God became human so that the human might become divine." What a grand view of the human!

But what if Incarnation was really about God, and not primarily about us? Last Sunday evening during our Advent devotional service, we enjoyed a journey around the world, learning more about the many traditions that have been formed to help celebrate Christmas. We discovered that the date for Christmas was a long time in forming, falling in January for some, in March, and even May for others, before finally settling in on December 25th. You see, it was Good Friday and Easter, not Christmas that established the date for Christianity's beginning. The uniquely revealing moment in Christianity is the resurrection. That is where God's transcendent power was revealed and displayed in a way that has never been seen, felt, or duplicated since. The resurrection lifted up Jesus' death on the Cross, and his life among us as God's servant, as the revelation of the life, the love, the will of God. The true significance of Jesus' birth was not appreciated at the time of its occurrence, but only subsequently, retrospectively, from the date of his rebirth, which is to say, his resurrection. If he had remained in the tomb, then he would have become at best just another of our world's many misguided idealists. But with the resurrection it has become clear that something more than a tragic hero's story was at stake here. We have been visited by the glory of God, and not just visited. The Gospel of John tells us that in this man the Word of God was made flesh. He didn't just visit for a while; he dwelt among us, and he lives among us still. In him was life; and his life has become a light for all, a light whose witness epitomizes the fullness of God's grace and truth. Incarnation isn't about what's right about human beings. It's about what is true about God. It's about what should be right about how we live before God and with one another. In the same vein, Christmas isn't primarily about the holiday spirit. It's about the Holy Spirit, and how God calls us to be born again. As John writes, but to

as many as received him, who welcomed his birth and accepted his death as the revelation of God's life, to them he gave the power to become the children of God, which were born not of the flesh or by our own will, but born of God, to live not as if his death made no difference for the choices we make every day, but to go through every day as if his life now lives through us so that God's love might become as visible through us as it was in Jesus himself.

That's our hope. That's our prayer. That's what we need to be committing ourselves to today. Let's end as we began, with a word of prayer. Gracious Lord, how can we comprehend the mystery of the Word made flesh? How can we begin to look upon your life as the key to understanding what God's life is like, and what ours should be like? How can we learn to see what God saw in you, to hear what God spoke through you, to receive what God gives with you? Grant us a grace that will open our minds to grasp God's divine glory in your humanness, a grace that will open our hearts to embrace God's love in your sacrifice, a grace that will open our lives to receive God's power through your witness of service ... in Jesus' name. Amen