

Sermon on John 1:1-14
Christmas Day, December 25, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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Last night we heard the familiar story from Luke's gospel of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, praised by angels as the promised Messiah sent by God to bring peace to all the earth. The passage ended with the shepherds returning to their fields and flocks, wondering about all these things that they had heard and seen that night. They left Jesus' mother Mary at the manger, watching over her newborn child, treasuring all these words which had been said, and pondering them all in her heart. It had all been very strange indeed, yet wonderful, these glimpse the shepherds had of the heavens opening up to hear the angels sing "*Peace on earth, good will to all.*"

But the only ones who truly knew what was happening were God and the angels, who had appeared as messengers of good news. Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds were almost clueless (especially the shepherds, who were the most surprised). Mary at least had received a previous visit from the angel Gabriel, telling her that she would be the mother of God's promised Messiah. In Matthew's gospel Joseph had heard from an angel in his dreams, who had told him to go ahead with this marriage to Mary, despite her mysterious pregnancy. Joseph likely slept with one eye open from then on! He would have later dreams after the child was born, warning him of King Herod's wrath at the birth of a Messiah, and to run away to Egypt. But on the night of Jesus' birth, Joseph simply wondered at it all and said nothing worth quoting in the gospels! (Joseph seems like one of those quiet, Scandinavian types, who listened well, did what he was told, and didn't say a word to anybody! But, I digress!)

So now it is Christmas morning, and when Joseph and Mary woke up, I wonder what they said to each other about the night before! What did they think about all those shepherds coming to visit, and what the angels had said? We don't know. But it's probably not a stretch to say that they had a lot of questions for one another, and not a lot of answers!

Unlike Luke and Matthew, John has nothing at all to say about the actual, physical birth of Jesus in his gospel. He refers to it generally in his Prologue, but otherwise John goes immediately to telling us about John the Baptist, who introduces Jesus to us (as the "Lamb of God"). John wants to get write to the story of who Jesus is and what he does. He doesn't have time for a lot of storytelling – enough of that in Matthew and Luke!

But what John does right off is share a beautiful, poetic image of the *meaning* of Jesus' coming in the portion read this morning as the Christmas Gospel – which may have been an ancient song or hymn in praise of what God has done. It's a song unlike any of our modern Christmas carols, of course, far harder to put to music than even the Medieval carol texts we love to sing. The ancient church probably chanted these words, to a melody we no longer remember, sung originally in Greek. It went like this (listen for the meaning in the words, and how John used the image of "light"):

*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.*

*What has come into being 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...

The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;

Yet the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

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.

This is a Christmas story not as easy to tell as the one Luke told last night! It's much more symbolic, and requires some unpacking – which is hard for us to do on a Christmas morning, after a night of feasting and frolic. Most of our songs these days are about fat little elves and flying reindeer, so a poem full of rich imagery about light and darkness is probably beyond our limited comprehension! But it's time to wake up and smell the coffee, because these images offer us an explanation to all the fuss around a human being named Jesus who was born to show us all the way to God, and to life.

But in John's gospel Jesus isn't named until he is introduced by the Baptist. In the beginning he is known as "the Word" – in Greek the *logos*. This Word was with God from the very beginning of Creation, and it is by God's "word" that the world was created good. But now the world was all in darkness, the darkness of sin, of betrayal, infidelity, hatred and violence – none of it intended by God. So into this world of darkness, God has sent his light to shine so that everyone in the world might see the way to God. But

this light didn't come like a brightly shining sun that everyone can see. The light came as "the Word made flesh" – the word, the power, the very person of God *made flesh* – as a human being to live among other human beings upon the earth. Not everyone would hear the truth of his words, or be able to see or understand his identity as God's Son, but the Word of God has indeed come to us, in the person of Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one of God. This is the witness that the persons who knew Jesus in person, "in the flesh", have passed on to us: the truth that Jesus was, and is, the Son of God.

How did they come to know this, or come to understand? The rest of John's gospel is the story of how the true person of Jesus of Nazareth was revealed in the words that he said, the miracles of healing that he performed, which were all signs of his identity as God's Son. It begins with the baptism of our Lord by John, when God's voice spoke from the heavens that this was God's beloved Son. The gospel ends with the crucifixion of Jesus, showing the depth of God's love for the world and Jesus' obedience to God's will, and with the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead on Easter.

It can take a lifetime of reading and re-reading the story to grasp its powerful meaning. We can't hope to understand all of this in just one day. But today, on this Christmas morning, we are blessed by God to hear once more the story being told that reveals who this child Jesus truly was: the Son of God, whom God has sent to us in order to show you and me the way to life, through faith in him. It all starts with this story of God's mercy and love, when the very Word of God became flesh and lived among us.

For Christ has come to us TODAY to the shine God's light of truth, mercy, and love into the world's darkness. For one day the suffering of all the world's people from sickness, violence, poverty and war will end, and we shall all know the truth of God's love. Jesus has shown us the way to live as God has created us to live, with faith in God, and love for one another. We begin to see the light when we first recognize Jesus as the Son of God, the Word made flesh. The light begins to shine when we also see Christ in our neighbor, to see other human beings as our brothers and sisters, and children of God. For John, this meant following Jesus' example of forgiving sins, showing compassion for the poor, feeding the hungry, and even washing his disciples' feet. For when we do this, we begin to understand the true glory of God revealed in his Son. By loving our neighbors in word and deed, we begin to understand how "the Word became flesh and lived among us" – and the real meaning of the Christmas story in our lives.

So a Blessed Christmas to you all – and may the Peace of God, and Word made flesh, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord!