

“Christmas Morning” by Deborah Sokolove

December 25, 2016

Christmas Day



Texts: Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-12, John 1:1-14

It's Christmas morning. Most of us were here a good portion of the day yesterday, sharing a delicious feast, singing carols, and re-telling the story of how Jesus was born in less-than-ideal conditions. Last night, we heard that Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary had to travel a long way from where they had been living because Caesar Augustus wanted to register everyone for a new tax. We heard about angels and shepherds, and Mary pondering everything that had happened in her heart. So what are we doing here this morning, getting ready to share Communion instead of still comfortably in our jammies, sipping cocoa and unwrapping the presents that someone left under our gaily-decorated trees?

The answer is that it's Sunday, and Christians have been gathering on Sundays for two thousand years to retell our ancient stories, to sing, to pray, and to listen for whatever new word God is trying to tell us. We gather on Sunday because this day is understood not just as the first day of the week, but also as the first day of the New Creation –

a commemoration of the Sunday on which the disciples found the tomb empty and understood for the first time that Christ has risen. So not only is Christmas not really about presents and decorated trees (as much fun as THAT is), it is not really (or not only) about that little baby, kicking and cooing in the manger. Today is about what who that the Holy Child was and is – the One who lived and died and rose again, the one in whom we recognize the very face of God.

But let's go back to baby Jesus for a few minutes, if only to remind ourselves how confusing that story is. In last Sunday's Gospel reading, which was from the Gospel according to Matthew, we read a version of the birth of Jesus that focused on Joseph. In this telling, Joseph was not simply a bystander, a hapless stage prop standing around in the background while Mary and Jesus got all the glory. Rather, as Marjory pointed out, Joseph's decision to protect Mary and her son was the action of a loving, honorable, good man who takes on responsibility because it is the right thing to do, even when it is inconvenient, difficult, or even dangerous. In Matthew's version of the story, the only angel is the one who lets Joseph know that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and instructs him to name the baby Jesus. Joseph is the star of this show, and Mary has no lines at all,

Last night, if course, we heard Luke's version of the story. Luke is the one who tells us about the those angelic announcements to Zechariah about Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, and to Mary about hers, and finally tells the shepherds about the actual birth, accompanied by heavenly hosts singing alleluia. Luke goes on to tell us that after Mary treasured all these things in her heart, she and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple for a blessing, and then they all went back to Nazareth.

Somehow, Luke doesn't mention the mysterious star, the visit from the Magi, the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, or the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. Of course, that all comes later, maybe when Jesus is a toddler. And anyway, that's back in Matthew's version, which we will get back to in the next week or so. Sigh. It's really hard to keep all this straight. It's much more fun to imagine Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, angels, Magi, cows, and donkeys all gathered around a

perfect little baby kicking and cooing in a pile of hay.

Today, however, just to make the story more complicated, we have yet a third version of the coming of Christ into time and history. In his version of the Good News, John doesn't say anything about Mary, Joseph, mangers, shepherds, Magi, or even the baby Jesus. Instead, he proclaims, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ..." John isn't telling us a charming story about a cooing baby. John is telling us a cosmic story in which the God who made everything becomes a human being because we human beings keep making a mess of things. We keep forgetting how much God loves us. We keep doing terrible things to one another. So, John tells us, " the Word became flesh and lived among us."

It is no accident that the first words in the Gospel according to John are "In the beginning..." John's first readers would have been familiar with the first chapter of Genesis, which also starts, "In the beginning..." Just as Genesis begins with God speaking the universe into being, John, too begins with divine speech: "In the beginning was the Word..."

Words, in ancient times, were not merely arbitrary sounds having no intrinsic connection to the objects or actions they referred to. On the contrary, words for our spiritual ancestors had great power. For instance, in Hebrew the same word, *dabhar* (דַּבָּר), is used both for "word" or "speech" and for "thing." In those first verses of Genesis, God has only to speak, and what God says is instantly real. Let there be light, God says, and there was light.

In our Gospel reading for today, the Greek word that we translate as "word" is *logos* (λόγος), the root of our word "logical." For speakers of Greek at the time John was writing, it meant both thought and speech, not just the arbitrary name for an idea, but the idea itself. Logos is the organizing principle of God. So when John tells us that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God" he is telling us that this Word is God's own speech, God's

own thinking, God's very own self.

And just as God speaks light into being in Genesis, John says, God's Word comes into the world as light: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."

In these grand, rolling verses John does let us know that a baby was born. For how else could the Word, the true light, come to live among us, except as a human being? And how does a human being come into the world? Through being born.

Which brings us back to those odd, inconsistent stories that Matthew and Luke tell us about the birth of Jesus. Several years ago, I team-taught a course with my then-colleague, Professor of New Testament Sharon Ringe. In that class, we explored the Nativity stories through the arts as well as through solid biblical scholarship. I'm not sure what the students learned, but Sharon and I learned a lot from one another. Sharon has since retired, but one of the things that stays with me from that course is the difference between reading the Gospel stories as history, and reading them as ways to understand how God has worked and continues to work in human lives.

For many of us, reading about angelic announcements, miraculous pregnancies, and traveling wise men following a star defies our reason. The discrepancies between Matthew and Luke make it hard to believe that either of them is historically accurate. Literary and anthropological analyses tell us that similar stories were commonly told about heroes and demigods in Roman times. And even if we accept the general outlines of the story, there are many arguments about the details – was Jesus REALLY born in a stable? Or was it a cave? Or just the lower story of a house? All the text says, after all, is that Mary put him in a manger because there was no guest-room available. Or were Mary and Joseph REALLY poor? Or, since Joseph was a carpenter, wasn't

he a skilled, prosperous artisan just temporarily out of funds because of an unexpected journey?

But to get into those weeds is to miss the big story, the one that John invites us into, the one that assures us that God cares about us so much that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the one that had Renaissance painters put an anachronistic crucifix into every Nativity scene, so we wouldn't forget that this little baby was the Word made flesh, the One in whom we could discern the very face of God. And this Word, this idea/speech/organizing principle through which the world in which we live was made, God's very own self, continues to dwell among us, as members of his Risen Body.

It seems to me that today's world isn't all that different from the world in which John was writing. We hear of calamity after calamity, wars and terror and tyrants on the front page of the newspaper every day, hatred and fear rising everywhere we look. For many of us, whatever illusions of progress that we have held have been shattered, as racism, misogyny, and threats of violence seem to have become normalized practically overnight. John's great story tells us that God has not forgotten us, that God still loves us, and that God took on our pain, our fear, our sorrow in order to help us remember that great love, even when the world around us seems most grim.

When I started to work on this sermon, I thought that I might make some connections between the birth of Jesus and my own story, I wanted tell you about when I, like Mary, was an unmarried pregnant teenager, frightened, not just for my own well-being, but about how I would care for this new life. Would I be a good mother? Unlike Mary, I hadn't had a visit from an angel, and I had no delusions that I was carrying the offspring of the Holy Spirit. But I couldn't figure out how to make my memories connect to John's big story.

Then, I thought that I might talk about poverty and oppression and tyrants, and how hard the world was for Joseph and Mary, how hard the world looks for so many people now, both in this country and pretty

much everywhere else in the world; and what we are called to do in response to God's overwhelming love for us. But I'm going to leave connecting boycotts and demonstrations and systemic action for the healing of the world with John's big story up to those of you who do that sort of thing much better than I do.

Instead, I'm going to come back to Marjory's question in our reflection paragraph, in which she asks what the physical body of Jesus has to do with our own bodies as an expression of God's intent for human life. It seems to me that if we take seriously the idea that we are the Body of Christ, then the physical body of Jesus is no more or less important, no more or less holy, than our own. As Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), a mystic monk who lived around the turn of the 11th century, puts it,

We awaken in Christ's body,

As Christ awakens our bodies

There I look down and my poor hand is Christ,

He enters my foot and is infinitely me.

I move my hand and wonderfully

My hand becomes Christ,

Becomes all of Him.

I move my foot and at once

He appears in a flash of lightning.

Do my words seem blasphemous to you?

—Then open your heart to him.

And let yourself receive the one

Who is opening to you so deeply.

For if we genuinely love Him,

We wake up inside Christ's body

Where all our body all over,

Every most hidden part of it,

Is realized in joy as Him,

And He makes us utterly real.

And everything that is hurt, everything

That seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,

Maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged

Is in Him transformed.

And in Him, recognized as whole, as lovely,

And radiant in His light,

We awaken as the beloved

In every last part of our body.*

We are here this morning because we ARE the body of Christ, who came into human life as a crying, cooing, helpless baby; who lived a life of radical love in union with the God who continually calls creation into being; who died on the cross and rose again, just as mysteriously as he was born. As we see in our response to baby Eli, every baby is the Holy Child. When we look with the eyes of Christ, every family is the Holy Family. When we awaken in Christ's body, every person we meet is aflame with the divine light.

Words have power. When I said, earlier, that today is Christmas morning, it may have conjured up images of decorated trees, piles of presents, and a groaning table. It may have brought up good memories, or sad ones, or none at all.

But the ancient, proper name of this holy day is the Feast of the Incarnation, the celebration of the moment when the Word became flesh

and dwelt among us. Christmas is only a nickname – take it or leave it. In a few moments, we will gather in a circle to share a bit of bread and a sip of the fruit of the vine. As we eat and drink together, let us remember not just the birth, but the life, death, and resurrection of the Incarnate One, who taught us to pour out our lives for the healing of the world. As we eat and drink together, let us become what we already are, the Body of Christ.

*Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Hymn 15, “We awaken in Christ’s body” from *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 38f. See <http://cac.org/christs-body-2016-12-16/>