

THE LONG VIEW OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas Day, 2014: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14

If we were to summarize the content of our worship and ritual here at church on Christmas Eve, the question “What is this thing that God has done?” would probably serve. And I particularly love that we ritualize our wonder and amazement in this service by disturbing our evening routines and coming to church. Typically, Christians who do not live in monastic communities are morning people, recalling Easter morning each time we gather. Christmas Eve is the exception. In my mind, I see a picture of those vigil candles we light on Christmas Eve as not being received and lighted at church, but rather lighted at home to guide our way through the darkness of night, a long procession of the faithful with lighted candles walking to the parish church, walking to the crèche perhaps, crowding into the warmth of the Bethlehem barn and taking our place alongside the shepherds and the sheep; keeping those candles or our lamps lighted throughout the night for warmth, illumination, understanding. “What is this thing that God has done? What does it mean that this should happen in our lifetime and in this lonely place?” We keep the candles burning, not just through the night, but for days after. They signalled hope in the dark night when our sleep was disturbed and we left the comfort and warmth of our bed, our room; put on warm clothes and journeyed to see the miracle God had wrought. Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus. We do not want to extinguish those candles, forget about the light of hope, for a very long time.

This morning ritualizes our return to the crèche. We returned home last night, hoping to catch a few hours’ sleep before dawn, only to find that we were too excited to sleep. What had happened last night seemed so fantastic, we begin to wonder if it were real. Was it just a wonderful dream? And so, in the cold light of morning, we put on our warm clothes again and return to the stable. They are still there, we find, but in a day’s time their friends will come and help them prepare for the long trip home. Even though it is morning, even though there is a sense of life resuming its normal rhythms – animals are being fed, the cows and goats are being milked – the afterglow of the night’s events still fills the barn with a feeling of the extraordinary. This is not every day; this is a day unlike any other day. Everything has changed, even though (in a sense) nothing has changed. “What has God done?” still lingers in the air. But now a new question joins the former: “Who is Jesus? How can a single human life interrupt the routines and the norms of the daily round and, even more, herald change – real change?”

John the Evangelist lived with this question. He was not in the barn last night, except in his mind’s eye. But the events of what, in memory, seem to be golden days, the days of Jesus’ teaching and preaching and healing, and then the passion of his defeat on Calvary, followed almost immediately with the unbelievable joy in his return from death – all these things fuel John’s question (and ours, if the truth be known): “Who is Jesus?”

John ponders. He reads and reflects on his reading. He goes out at night and stares up at the vastness and the beauty of the night sky – unchanged mostly since that dark night of Jesus’ birth many years ago; unchanged since Abraham and Sarah looked up at it and heard God’s promise of covenant and parenthood of a holy nation. Jesus is part of this greater world, John reasons. Jesus is Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Aaron and Ruth and David and Solomon, and even the Baptist (may he rest in peace). They are all caught up in an incredible, unlikely story of God’s authorship, each chapter an attempt to reach out and make the essential connection that will enable God’s beloved children to know or at least glimpse who they are because of God; who they can be if they learn to shape their lives around the first question “what has God done?”

John sits down with pen in hand. He thinks of God’s essence. He thinks of Jesus. They are the same! They are each part of the other. “In the beginning was the Word,” he writes; “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” Does any of this make sense? Yes; but it’s difficult. “All things came into being through him,” he continues, “and without him not one thing came into being.” That’s good. That’s Genesis. People will be able to reconnect here, even if I lost them earlier. “What has come into being in him was...was...hmmmm...life” – yes! that’s it – life (but more than life, really; a kind of life in capital letters, life in all its fullness and glory). “What has come into being in him was life...and the life was the light...hmmmm...of all people.” Yes that’s it. This is the key to who Jesus is. He is God’s means of embracing the whole of humanity – all people; the whole world! Life...light. What

was it that Isaiah wrote? I remember: “the light shines in the darkness...” – true; but it doesn’t really redefine the light as the Resurrection and all Jesus’ teaching and healing redefined it. Hhhmmm...”the light shines in the darkness...and the darkness did not overcome it!” That’s it! There never was a return to night. Jesus changed everything! There is still darkness, but the light always triumphs. God cannot be controlled or contained. God is dangerous – perhaps I won’t write that.

Who is Jesus? We know him and have come to know him and know God (for that matter) through his love; and not just love – but love with power; power to change things; power to change people; power to change us: you and me.

We become night people who rise from sleep and carry light to the bedside of someone who is suffering from lack of light. We become morning people, still lighting candles even in full daylight, as a sign of the hope that is within us. The Word. The Light. The Love that redeems, recreates, transforms.

May the deep blessing of Christmas be yours forever!