December 29, 2013 – First Sunday after Christmas

© Jean E. Mornard

I think this may be my favorite passage in all of the Gospels – maybe even in the whole New Testament. Last week I mentioned that we had been on a journey backwards through time and today, with this passage, we have arrived at the end of that journey, which is the beginning of all things. And there, at that beginning, was the Word, 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. It doesn’t get more beginning than that, as least as far as we’re concerned.

But all of that is well and good; however, compared to Matthew’s and Luke’s very human nativity stories, John’s is a little heady and intellectual. Maybe even a little removed from our common experience. It’s not the stuff you write Christmas carols about or create pageants around. But year after year we Episcopalians read this passage on the first Sunday after Christmas. Why is that?

Many scholars believe that John’s Prologue is actually a very early Christian hymn to the Word. If this is so, and since it’s clear that when John is referring to the Word he means Jesus, it would in fact make this passage one of the earliest Christmas carols ever. The text is commonly divided up into five sections, or verses if it were a hymn.

The first verse is “The Word and God” (vv. 1, 2), which describes Jesus’ relationship to God – namely that Jesus IS God. The second verse is “The Word and Creation” (vv. 3–5), which talks about Jesus as the agent of all creation, of life and unquenchable light. The third verse is “The Word and John” (vv. 6–8), which is kind of an explanatory side note to go with the second verse. It doesn’t go into the kind of detail about John here, that the other Gospels do, but merely how he relates to the aforementioned light.

The fourth verse is “The Word and the World” (vv. 9–13), which starts to explain Jesus’ relationship to the world he came to save, and to those who accepted him and those who didn’t. And finally the fifth verse, “The Word and the Community” (vv. 14–18), which wraps the whole thing up.

Scholars have written whole books – really FAT books – on John’s prologue alone, and to talk about the whole thing in any depth would seriously cut into our coffee hour. But I do want to touch on two verses briefly, starting at the end.

The last stanza of the hymn starts with verse 14, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us….” I know I mentioned this last year at this time, but you can’t talk about the Gospel of John in general, and John’s prologue specifically, and not talk about John’s high Christology – meaning that the divinity of Jesus is first and foremost. But this verse also contains a very low Christology – Jesus at his most human. That’s the genius of the Gospel John – you can’t put him neatly in a theological box because he’s always surprising us.

So here we have the Word – the Logos – of God, who IS God, becoming flesh and living among us. The word for living among us is *skénoó*, which literally means to pitch one’s tent. This word has a double meaning, just like that sentence does, because in the Old Testament, the earliest Tabernacles containing the Holy of Holies were movable tents that were carried around by the Israelites and pitched where God told them to. So the tent was the place where God came to rest on earth.

But it also means just what it says – to make camp with someone. Jesus this divine being who created the universe, became a simple human being and just moved into our neighborhood. And through that action, we have seen God and have received the gifts of grace and forgiveness. In a few short verses, Jesus has gone from being the remote, creating Word, to being our friend and neighbor – someone we can trust and hang out with.

\*\*\*\*

The other verse I wanted to mention specifically is verse five – “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” This verse is interesting partially because of the two verbs – the light shines, and the darkness did not overcome it. The verb “to shine” is in the present tense. This indicates an ongoing action continuing into the present time. The verb, “to overcome,” however, is in the aorist tense, which indicates an action that is completed.

This really is significant to more than a few Greek geeks and English teachers. Though the verse doesn’t tell us what the nature this darkness was – whether it was Satan or merely the chaos before Jesus brought the light into the world – it seems pretty clear that there was some kind of conflict and the light won. To me this is one of the most important parts of this Gospel passage, as it relates to us today.

Jesus’ light SHINES, it says. It shines, and continues to shine, and is reflecting all over the world like a giant cosmic disco ball, flying in the face of the darkness that couldn’t overcome it then and cannot overcome it now.

That light is reflected in the hearts of people who feel compelled to help others who are in desperate need. It’s reflected in the faces of new babies, who seem to bring the world back to life with a single gummy smile. It’s reflected in the calloused hands and aching backs of people who are helping to rebuild homes and lives after catastrophes.

It’s reflected in us, here today, as we literally and figuratively join hands and hearts in the Eucharist with Christians all over the world. We can’t help it – it’s our inheritance, John says. “But to all who received him, 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.”

With so much light bouncing around, could it be that there actually is hope for the world? It seems at times like the darkness is winning, but remember what John said. The light shines into the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. CANnot overcome it. Ever.

Sounds like hope to me.

So John doesn’t give us a baby, or a mother, or wise men, or shepherds, or stars, or mangers. But nevertheless he gives us a very real Jesus, who took on our nature and pitched his tent next door to ours, as one of us. He very much gives us Emmanuel – God with us. He gives us a living, breathing Savior who created us and covered us with his grace and light. He gives us Jesus. What we do with that gift, and how we reflect that light, is up to us. Starting today.

Amen.