

Sermon on John 1-1-18: In the Beginning...

During the service Christmas Eve, we sang a hymn whose title is "What child is this?" This question was posed within the hymn in a rhetorical manner because the lyrics already provide the answer: It is Christ, the King. Who else could it be as shepherds came to visit because the angels told them about this child born in a manger in the nearby town of Bethlehem. What all four gospel narratives are doing in their opening chapters is establishing who the man Jesus was, but how that identity is established varies among the gospels. The narratives were all written after all the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection were over. They were written by those who were followers of this Jesus of Nazareth, now called the Christ. These followers sought to understand what they knew about Jesus. Matthew and Luke answer this question which is really "Who is this Jesus?" by providing genealogies and miraculous events around the nativity: Angels visiting shepherds with good news; a new star in the heavens to guide men across a desert to the site. Mark, the first account written down, just states Jesus' identity as a given fact in the opening lines and then relates the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. We will come to that event in the lectionary readings next week. Our passage this morning is from the fourth gospel account. The writer of the gospel of John answers this question of who Jesus is in an entirely different manner. To the question, "What child is this?", the gospel of John answers...in the beginning. But you might say, there is no child in this text. There is no mention of Mary who was made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. There is no babe lying in a manger. There are no shepherds keeping watch in nearby fields who are visited by singing hosts of angels. There are no visiting Magi. There is no talk of a threat from King Herod. In fact, there is no mention of a child at all. With all of those elements missing, why I am saying that this is John's answer to the question: "What child is this?" Instead of starting his gospel account about Jesus with details about Jesus' entry into human history, John begins with a prologue of eighteen verses which profoundly answer the question of just who the child presented in the other gospels is. This prologue provides insights which enhance our understanding and appreciation of the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew. Matthew and Luke's gospels begin with a focus on the humanity of Jesus without denying his divinity. John's gospel however focuses on the divine nature of Jesus Christ without minimizing his humanity. If we are to truly celebrate Christmas in its fullest meaning, that babe in the manger's image must contain those truths about that child found most strongly in John's prologue. So again this morning, I am going to focus away from those Magi who are just now nearing Bethlehem according to Matthew and take us carefully through what John has to tell us about this child whose birth into the messiness of human history we just celebrated.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

That really sums up all we need to know about who entered human history as an infant born to a poor Palestinian peasant. In John, Logos is the Greek word translated as Word. Logos can be translated in many ways according to context; for example, as "saying, matter, decree, mandate or teaching". Logos was a very important word to the philosophically minded Greeks who delighted in complex logical constructs. They often used logos to convey complex ideas where

logos was used to mean "reason" or "the central principle of something". To John it represents the personification of God. This opening phrase of John's gospel is familiar because the verse is very reminiscent of Genesis...where the first words are, In the beginning. This is very intentional, because if you think about Genesis which describes God whose Spirit is moving over the water...how does creation happen? It happens because God speaks. As God is moving Genesis 1: 3 tells us: "And God said, let there be light. And there was light." And so we have the story of creation. God's words create. John tells us the same thing. "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." Many people love these verses because of their beauty and their simplicity. In their beauty we often overlook the fundamental truth they convey. In the beginning was the Word. Because we know that John is talking about God Incarnate we overlook the truth that the Creator and the Redeemer are the same. The deep truth of this is one of those things that we often have trouble understanding, because it is a statement about God's triune nature--and really we just can't make logical sense of it. I have never been sure why we as humans think we should be able to understand everything about God. We just don't have the capacity to understand it--although there have been whole libraries of books written on the subject which attempt this feat. And we often get tripped up with our semantics here because we want to jump in and say Jesus was with God...well, yes and no. The Word, as John tells us, was with God and was one with God, but nowhere in the text does John give the Word the name Jesus. Jesus is the name given to that child, that Incarnation of the Word, at that particular point in human history. When speaking of the Trinity, we sometimes refer to the Incarnate Word of God as the second person of the Godhead, but I am not so much interested in getting tangled up in the messy nomenclature of something we really don't have the ability to understand. What I would like to emphasize is what John is pointing out...the Word was with God in the beginning, the Word was active in creation, and what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. That child that was born and laid in a manger represents an important event in the story of God's relationship with humanity, but that child in whom the Word dwelled was there in the beginning. So one of the things John is telling us is that when we look at that baby, or listen to the man Jesus teaching the disciples, we are hearing the Words of God. In John 1: 3b we are also reminded that what came into being in the Word was life. The Word created life, and through the incarnation, the Word came to offer life again--eternal life--to humanity which had rebelled against God. Keeping in mind all these important aspects about the word Logos in Greek, there is another thing we should remember about that translation as word, the most basic meaning of word beginning with a small "w". What child is this? This child is the Incarnate Word, this child is God found in human flesh and dwelling among us, but his child is also God's message to us; God's words to us; what God most wants to tell us. This child represents the heart of all that the infinite and immortal God would say to us who are mortal and finite; we who have such difficulty in listening to God's message for us. So in his opening verses, John invites us to pay very careful attention to what this child will say to us when he grows up because in what he has recorded for us we can hear God speaking clearly, directly, and eloquently to us of the great love which has surrounded us from the beginning. Perhaps this is most clearly expressed in verse 18 of our passage: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. There are many

ways to describe this. John Calvin said that the Incarnation was God's accommodation to humanity's limited capacity while Karl Barth a 20th century theologian called it God's extravagant condensation. However, you want to describe it--the gospel of John makes it a clear statement: God came to earth. God entered human history. At that time and in that place in a new and different way God came to dwell within human flesh. The word which John uses to describe this dwelling in human flesh is one that implies living in a tent. It carries the same meaning as one used in Hebrew texts to describe the time in Israel's history when God dwelled in a physical tent or tabernacle and moved among them. God used human flesh to dwell among us for a time. God entered human history in a very intimate way--the Word which was God and was there in the beginning and through which everything was created came and dwelled in human flesh and spoke directly to us. No intermediaries. No barriers between us. When we look at the manger scenes, we need to not only see an infant in swaddling cloths, but see as John did, the Word which was also God. These may seem somewhat deep theological waters, but it is important to remember the divine nature of that child. Because looking through the lens of John, we recognize the eternal nature of the Word--as the Word was there in the beginning, so the Word is with us today. Although Jesus physically dwelt on earth for a finite time, the Word that was there in the beginning is still present. John is also the gospel that records the promise that when Jesus returned to the Father the helper, the Holy Spirit would come and dwell with those who believed. Truly the good news of all the gospel accounts is this eternal commitment of God to a relationship with humanity. What child is this? This child is the Word of God Incarnate--God who came and lived among us for love of us--God who now is again the Word with the Father in ways we cannot understand but which we know to be true. God who was, who is and who ever will be. Thanks be to God for the Word who came and dwelt among us and who will come and dwell within us. Amen.