

December 25, 2014

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John1:1-14

Incarnation & Identity, Prose & Poetry

I love today's gospel reading, these first verses of John's gospel, sometimes called the "Prologue" to John, this introduction about incarnation and identity.

It begins with an echo of Genesis: "in the beginning," Genesis says, "In the beginning, God." Echoing that, the gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word," and then continues, with lyrical simplicity, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

It's poetry, epic poetry, for it's not just a matter of style, but substance, subject matter, before there was matter, what was there, what existed before existence. John one is about primordial time and the essence of God, about the nature of God and how God becomes known to us, about God becoming one of us, becoming truly human.

In these first verses from this gospel, we do not hear the name Jesus, but John's prologue is all about Jesus, about the identity of the second person of the Trinity. It's about Jesus, the Word of God which became incarnate, before he became incarnate, before he became a human being, before his birth, which we celebrate today. These first verses of John's gospel are an answer to the question: Where was Jesus, before he was born of Mary? John one one tells us, before anything was created, Jesus was there. "In the beginning was the Word." He was there, before anything was created, because the Word was not created. The Son is eternally begotten, not made. Jesus is the Word, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

I think the prologue of John is one of the most beautiful parts of scripture. Biblical scholars muse that it might be part of an ancient Christian hymn, that this section of this gospel was actually one of Christian's earliest creeds, perhaps a sung creed, which was then incorporated, and included as an introduction into this most mystical of the gospels.

Close your eyes and you can just barely hear strains of the song, across the ages, hear the ethereal melody of this cosmic aria, "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." Centuries later, you can still catch the arc of its ancient cadence, echoing across eternity, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

And then you get: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John." Plopped right into this epic poem, a straightforward sentence, a prosaic announcement: "There was a man whose name was John." Just as we were sorting out the pre-incarnate identity of the Word, we are introduced to someone else. We are introduced, in a more ordinary way, to a more ordinary someone named John.

Lest we be confused, this is another John than the writer of this gospel. This John, mentioned here in the prologue, is the John known in the other gospels as John the Baptist. Here in this gospel, though, the defining element of his identity is that he is a witness. That is how he is identified in the prologue, as a witness, and that is why he is included in it. That's why John is in this epic poem. He is included, and identified, for what he does, and for what he is not.

What is he not? He's not the light. Like the first few verses of this gospel, this line has a remarkable simplicity to it, but it's not particularly lyrical. It's not all that mystical. It's rather blunt. John is not God.

Still, straightforward as it is, isn't remarkable how often we get confused about it? Who

God is, and who is not? A member of our congregation told me a joke about surgeons—my apologies to any surgeons whom I'm about to offend. The joke goes: "What's the difference between God and a surgeon?" ... "God doesn't think he's a surgeon."

Of course, you can swap in any other profession that may encourage a particular sort of self-regard. For that matter, and more to the point, you can swap in the name of any person with a particularly misplaced sort of self-regard. The joke works because we know people who think they are God. The joke works because we know, because sometimes we act as if we are God, as if we have all the answers, as if we have it all together, as if we have no need of anyone or anything else.

If that were true, we wouldn't have Christmas. If everything were just fine as it is, if we were all just fine as we are—no need for divine intervention. No need for Christmas. No need for God.

We know it's not true. We know, though we sometimes act otherwise. Sometimes we deny this existence of God in that way, by thinking of ourselves in ways that are all out of whack, assuming a role that is God's alone. Or, sometimes, we feel all alone. Sometimes we deny the existence of God in that way. Sometimes it is despair that leads us to wonder if God even exists, as all we see all around us is darkness.

There is darkness, yes, but also light—a light that shines through it. The good news of the gospel, the good news of John one is: There is a God. Before anything else existed, there is God. The good news of John one is, there is a God—and you are not it. This is good news, this is very good news. This is music to our ears. God knows we need help, and God is coming, God has come to help us, "The true light, which enlightens everyone was coming into the world."

The light has come, and you are not the light. This is the very good news—because it is in this light that we can truly see ourselves, and that we can truly know ourselves. Like John, who is not the light, our identity becomes known in relation to the one who is. Because of the incarnation of God, because God has identified with us so completely as to become like one of us, we, too can know our identity. There is a mystical, cosmic correlation at work here. That is, the more you know the God who made everything, including you, the more the more you witness that God, the more you know who you are, the more you become who are created to be, a child of God, enlightened in the light of God.

Before there was anything, there was God. And then God came into the world. God became a person, whom other people might know. The word became flesh, so that people like John the Baptist, and John the gospel writer, and anyone else named John, and anyone else, by any other name, you and me, might come to know God.

Today, Christmas Day, we are included. We are invited into the prologue. We can add our names as witnesses, and know our identity, because the poetry of God includes the prose of humanity, because we too, have seen his glory, because the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.