

January 4, 2015

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John1:10-18

He Came Into His Own

2015—Happy New Year, church! Though we have the new year holiday behind us, as a church, we're still celebrating Christmas. One more Sunday with carols and decorations, one more gospel reading about the arrival of Jesus, the word become flesh. Today's gospel passage repeats and extends the gospel for Christmas Day, the beginning of the gospel of John. In the fourth gospel, instead of a stable and a manger, the appearance of Jesus is described in mystical, philosophical, metaphysical terms. This gospel announces the arrival of Jesus by going back to the arrival of it all, back to the beginning of life, asserting that the world came into being through him, and that he came into the world—but the world did not know him.

In the cold light of a Sunday morning, some days after Christmas Eve, it's something of a chilling element to the gospel of Christmas. Jesus arrived, and we didn't notice. As if to underscore it, the next verse repeats it: "He came into his own, and his own people did not accept him." He arrived in the world that exists because of him, but was unrecognized—even unaccepted. The giver of all life gives all, and people don't see it.

Sometimes that's how it goes at Christmas, gifts go unnoticed. I can think of painstaking present making projects, which have barely registered on the recipient. Sometimes you work really hard to find or make that really special gift for someone, but they don't even notice.

Or sometimes, you try to give someone something, but you have a strong suspicion that it will not be acceptable in some way. Thus the existence of the gift receipt. Now I know there are some crazy excesses around gift giving, and that these can lead to an amount of wasted resources that could be used in many other ways, so there is definite sense to the gift receipt. But still, practical as it is, the gift receipt is also a little sad, isn't it? How overtly it admits, "Here. You probably don't want this." And, I tend to think that using a gift receipt repeats this. I say this, with full disclosure that I've returned several of the gifts my husband has given me...

Sometimes that's how it goes, even with people you love. You give them something, and they don't want it. Sometimes, you give and give to someone, especially someone you love, and still... I think of some family situations I've seen, in which parents are so very concerned about their children; and the parents are giving all they can, and the child just doesn't seem to see it, or want it...

Or I think of about children caring for parents. Maybe one sibling is spending all this time checking in on an ailing parent. The one child is always giving time, giving support, giving, but the other siblings don't seem to notice... Sometimes that's how it goes in families.

Sometimes that's how it goes in church. I think of all that goes into so many things here, much of it unrecognized: the care for holy things, ready every Sunday for worship and then cleaned up afterwards; the sanctuary itself cleaned and prepped, bulletins folded crisply, waiting to be handed out by ushers; the counters who tarry after the service tallying gifts, tucked away unseen in the counting room downstairs, or before church, the Sunday School teachers and Adult Bible study leaders who do so much in that part of the building, unseen behind us now...

And that's just inside the church on a Sunday morning, there's so much that goes unrecognized during the week, the many who come to evening meetings or rehearsals or tinker around the place at various odd hours, the people who work with our ministry partners:

volunteering for the Irving Park Food Pantry, working with the MAP after school program, the Girl Scouts, the Boy Scouts. Even naming these, I'm sure I have not recognized many, so much giving, so much of it that is unseen.

That's how it goes, the gospel says. Jesus himself says it, in the great parable of the sheep and the goats. In that story, Jesus himself is unrecognized. Jesus gathers everyone together, says some have been feeding him, welcoming him, visiting him, and others have not. Everyone is astounded. They ask, "Lord, when did we see you? When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or in prison?"

He came into the world, but the world did not know him. He came into his own, and his own people did not accept him.

It sounds like a cold thing to say about those people back then. But it's not about them, just then, it's about us, it's about the human condition, and the divine relationship to it. God become flesh was—and still is—one of the great mysteries of Christian faith. A human being who lived two thousand years ago is also God? The metaphysics of it are mind blowing. Philosophical controversies about it are why we have and say things like the Nicene Creed—and still it is a mystery. So much about Jesus is so hard to understand.

So much about Jesus is hard to accept—including those things that Jesus points out about us, those things about us that are less than acceptable: our lack of gratitude for our own abundance; the gifts we refuse; the people we take for granted; the poverty and injustice that we don't, or can't, or won't see, "Lord, when did we see you?"

"No one has even seen God," today's gospel says. But the Son has made God known, two thousand years ago, and still today. Jesus makes God known to us. Jesus says that we can see God, and that we do see God, when we see other people: when we feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and visit the sick. We may think it goes unnoticed, but in Jesus, God is there, in and with those who are unnoticed. Whatever act of care we do, however small, the creator of it all is there. God is in every act of love, every gift you offer, in church and especially outside of it.

This is why we are here, for a brief bit of time on a chilly Sunday morning, so that we may receive God's mind-blowing gift of grace, and allow it to warm and transform who we are, how we live, how we spend all those other hours of our days, and weeks of this brand new year. What we do, who we are is noticed by God. It is a gift we can give, back to God. And it is a gift that God accepts, and delights in. It is all God wants for us, that we live lives of grace, and fullness. As St. Irenaeus said, way back in the year 185, "The glory of God is a human, fully alive." God wants us to live as the people we have been created to be. God has come into what was his own, so that we may come into our own.

Do you know that expression? "He's come into his own..." People say it when they observe someone functioning in a new and remarkable way. People say it when someone is really figuring out what they're meant to be, coming alive in it. Maybe it's an artist, whose found their true sound; maybe it's an athlete, whose perfected a motion; maybe it's a father, loving his son. Something astonishing, and also essential, is being revealed about them. "They've come into their own."

That's what God does for us, in Jesus. And we and have seen it, the glory as of a father's only Son, full of grace and truth.