

CHRISTMAS DAY

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Who Jesus Is

John 1:6-8, 19-28

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

It's Christmas Day. The day for figuring out the particulars of what we have received. And I'm not just talking that Quick Pot Cooker or fitness tracker gizmo. Last night we received the greatest gift God's ever given, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Now this morning we have some quiet time and space to set all the packaging aside to figure out who Jesus is.

The Apostle John in today's Holy Gospel describes him in cosmic, eternal terms. Baby Jesus is "the Word" and he is "God" even "in the beginning" (1:1-2). He calls him "life" and "light," "the true light that gives light to everyone, [which] was coming into the world" (1:4,9). Ultimately, John told us Jesus is "the Word become flesh" (1:14). He means, Jesus is the place and the person where God meets us and we meet God. A human being and the divine being in one person! The doctrinal term for this coming together of God and man is "the Incarnation." And we will confess the precise ancient doctrinal language of the church about who Jesus is (and isn't) after the sermon when we recite together the Second Article of the Athanasian Creed.

But right now let's consider the gift of Jesus from a different angle. I want to ask you a question which I think helps us as much as those cosmic and doctrinal terms do, if not more so, to get to the very heart of God and thus to really understand who the baby in the manger is. The question is "Why did Jesus come among us?" The first and best answer that comes to our Lutheran minds is "to save us from our sins!" Thus we tend to look at the Incarnation as the implementation of God's plan to rescue us from suffering and sin and evil and death. It all started in Bethlehem's manger and came to its climax on Calvary's cross and to its triumphal conclusion at Easter's empty tomb.

But there's also a classic, ancient answer to the question "Why did Jesus come among us?" While similar to our Lutheran "save us from our sins," it says, "He became what we are in order that we might become what he is." It too makes us think of the whole of Jesus' time on earth – his birth, life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection and ascension. "He became what we are" - though not in every respect for he didn't become a sinner. But he did become a human and thus subject to the fallen condition of humanity, namely to pain and suffering and even death. In being "born of natural descent" (1:13), as John put it today, Jesus became subject to these human things, so even at the cost of his own life we could be what he is: righteous and holy, or as John put it: "born of God" (1:13). That Jesus would come and do that for us tells us all we need to know about who he is for our lives now and forever.

But there's even more to know about the wondrous gift we've been given in him. And it requires more questions to uncover. Like, "Would Jesus have come as he did even if we hadn't fallen into sin?" Or to put it another way, was the Incarnation the result of God's frustration and disappointment with us? 'O for crying out loud! Look what you've done! Now I'm going to have to come down there and clean up the mess you made myself!" Or did the Incarnation arise out of something else in him?

Before we start speculating, let's look to some more of those terms the Apostle John was tossing around in today's Holy Gospel. Not those cosmic concepts we noticed earlier which brush us up against the edges of eternity, but the more down to earth ones. John writes, "[Jesus] was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:10-13).

Terms like "in the world" ... "recognize" ... "came to" ... "receive" ... "believe" ... "give" ... "children" ... "husband" ... "born" aren't of the cosmos, but of families and relationships. They describe a Jesus who came because he wants to be in a relationship with us. In fact, the arch of the entire Gospel reading for today, tracing time from its beginning until Christmas, gives us the impression that it was always God's intention – even from before the foundations of the universe were laid – to "make his dwelling among us ... [in] grace and truth" (1:14). In other words, the Incarnation – "the Word [becoming] flesh" comes out of God's eternal, loving interest in being with us. It's not the last straw of his disappointment with our weakness, rebellion and sin.

That means Mary's baby is not a corrective. He's not just an antidote to suffering and death. Nor is he merely the virgin-born solution necessitated by the problems sin has caused in God's world. He is the embodiment of the fact that there is nothing in God that is not committed to being in a perfect, loving relationship with us. No matter the cost! Jesus is what God is really all about.

It's Christmas Day. So, what are you going to do this afternoon after you've figured out your Quick Pot Cooker or fitness tracker gizmo? Because of the weather at this time of year there isn't much else to do after you've opened the presents, gone to church and eaten dinner other than sit around with each other. You're kind of a "all in," aren't you? That's why you usually spend Christmas with those rare people you can just hang out with. Typically, they are the people you deeply love in this world not because of their resumes or accomplishments or appearance. They're family and you just wanted to be with them at Christmas, even if it means sitting around together with them not doing much. Even if you wouldn't want to do it for much more than a few days. Even if don't always find them easy to deal with. Even if you don't agree with their politics ... or parenting techniques ... or fashion sense ... choice of a spouse.

This illustrates what I am getting at about why God loves us and thus who Jesus is. We are not merely a pretty face to God. A means to an end. We're not an achievement to him either. Despite what many denominations lead you to believe, he isn't constantly tinkering with us in hopes of finally getting us to run right. We are simply the ones with whom he wants to share his existence. As such he doesn't have a working relationship with us. God and humanity are not on a professional footing. God prefers to think of us a family, and so he wants to spend an eternity of Christmases with us because he is "all in" with us even before he sent Jesus for us. Now of course, he wants us to make good choices ... to love his grace and truth ... to revere him above everything and everyone else. But even when we fall short in this, God loves us and still wants to hang out with us. That's what the Incarnation shows us beyond a shadow of a doubt. That's really why "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (1:14).

And the way to be celebrate it is to simply and honestly love God back – not only for what he's done for us in giving us forgiveness, new lives and ultimately salvation ... and not just out of gratitude or fear or even necessity. The best way to celebrate Christmas is to love him back for who Jesus is: the determination of God to be with us forever, no matter the cost, no matter what. Merry Christmas.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

- L: Almighty God, you have made yourself known in the Word. Grant that his birth in the flesh may set us free from our old slavery to sin. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
- C: **[sung] Amen.**

Prayers of the Church

- L: Almighty Father, in the Incarnation of your Son you've shown yourself to be our loving God, determined to be with us forever. At Christmas we see how you've chosen to draw us into a loving relationship with you not by force, not by guilt, not by threat, not by necessity ... but by the winsome simplicity and vulnerability of a baby in the manger. May Jesus' dwelling among us as both God and man inspire our loving you for who you are, as well as for what you've done.

This morning we also pray for ...

- Sarah Seelow as she deliberates the call we've extended to her to serve among us. May she hear your voice in this call and prayerfully evaluate her current call and the opportunity to minister among us.
- For those who commune, that they receive the body and blood of Jesus worthily with repentant faith in his real presence here in the Sacrament, and that they depart having received grace upon grace from his fullness.

Hear us, O Lord, for the sake of your Son, the Word become flesh, the Savior of the nations, Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God. Amen.

Announcements

1. The COS staff thanks you for your kindness and generosity towards us this Christmas season.
2. Sarah Seelow has been called to serve in our preschool, children's and music ministries. Please keep her in your prayers.
3. Merry Christmas!