

Deacon Anne Auchincloss
Christmas I
John 1:1-18
December 25, 2016

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....”

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We have not been allowed to tarry at the manger, have we? It was just yesterday, Christmas Eve, that we reveled in our new- to -us crèche, replete with its female shepherd, and marveled anew at Luke’s familiar story of the virgin birth in a stable. The infancy narratives from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, easily lend themselves to visualization, with Mary and Joseph, the baby in the manger, the sheep and the shepherds, the angels and the angel choirs.

But here we are, on Christmas Day already beginning to deal with the implications of the birth of Jesus. The poetic language of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel reveals the mystery of the Incarnation. Through these words we get a glimpse of God’s eternal plan, as well as the Divine nature and origin of Jesus. The inclusion

2.

of this passage in the liturgy emphasizes that Christmas is much more than the recitation of a birth story in Bethlehem.

Whereas the synoptic infancy narratives focus on the earthly origins of Jesus, John is concerned with the heavenly existence of the Word – “in the beginning” – outside the human constraints of time and place.

The real meaning behind Christmas is found in the cosmic reality underlying the nativity. In John, God’s incarnate son is one with the Divine. Christmas is, finally and ultimately, the extraordinary proclamation of the Incarnation, of God-with-us in the person of Jesus Christ, and of all that tells us about the nature of our God.

The majestic hymn that opens the Gospel of John sets the stage for a whole new order of life, forged in the beginning of Creation with the presence of the Word, now made flesh among us, full of grace and truth. And God continues to take flesh in our midst, in the men and women and children who form His body today.

3.

This hymn is a love song, full of increasing light, celebrating the relationship between God and God's only child and then extending that intimate relationship to embrace all of humankind. These are powerful words that speak to us about the one who comes to us in power to make all things new for us – the exiles, the inhabitants of darkness. God loves a broken and fallen world, consumed with itself. And God sends his incarnate son to show **that** love, and to ask for our love in return. We are invited into relationship with the divine Logos or Word through which the world is both created and sustained.

Now and again, we get a glimpse of what God is doing among us. Now and again the light shines so brightly in the darkness that nothing can dim it. And now and again the people of God feel an upwelling of joy in their hearts, and they don't even know from whence it came.

The Fourth Gospel echoes Genesis with its opening, "In the beginning," as with the contrast between light and darkness.

4.

The latter is a frequent theme in John's Gospel and recalls the creation of day and night. The light Jesus brings cannot be overcome by the darkness.

The word "darkness" is primordial in nature with many connotations, all of them negative. As a poetic term, darkness can also mean the presence of shadows, evil, or depression. Darkness can have a strong psychological impact.

In the Old Testament, darkness was the second to last plague (Exodus 10:21) and in the New Testament the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 8:12)[4]

The use of darkness as a rhetorical device has a long-standing tradition. Shakespeare, working in the 16th and 17th centuries, had a character call Satan the "prince of darkness" (King Lear: III, iv) and gave darkness jaws with which to devour love. (A Midsummer Night's Dream: I, i) Chaucer, a 14th century Middle English writer, wrote that knights must cast away the "workes of darkness." Dante described hell as "solid darkness stain'd."

5.

As infants, we have an innate fear of loud noises and falling; and by the age of two, fear of darkness has been added to the litany. I feel the story of my son is worth repeating. At about the time he had achieved post-nightlight status, there was a massive and lengthy power outage in Rochester, NY. Eric reacted by emptying out his toy box and constructing a massive structure on the floor of his room. When asked what he was building, he replied, "A generator so you'll never have to be in the dark again, Mommy." Ah, would that it were that simple....

Because Jesus has come to live among us to show us the way, these days of Christmas call us to re-order and perhaps re-frame our lives so that we can live differently.

The coming of Jesus presents us with a choice. We can be transformed by the power of the gospel to be God's people, walking in God's way. Or we can reject him and continue business as usual, sitting in the darkness, shielding our eyes, and turning away from the life-giving light.

6.

As John says, "The light shines in the darkness." But there is an equally ancient Christian tradition of finding God in the dark. Light is clarity, dark is mystery. As Saint Augustine said, "We are talking about God. What wonder is it that you don't understand? If you do understand, then it is not God. Ever since the Enlightenment, our Western minds have reached for illumination as an aspect of God. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by

7.

judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.

May we have the grace to hear our words of witness steadily and joyfully and humbly, and to incarnate those words in the flesh by active interventions for good, so that the light that we celebrate at this season may be known to those who know us and even those who don't, until the day we see that Light face to face and praise God for all eternity.

Merry Christmas.

Amen