2nd Sunday after Christmas

Jan 4, 2015

*For we have seen his star in the East and have come to pay him homage.*

In the name of God Incarnate. Amen.

Have you ever noticed that when you get together with your family and start telling stories about when you were growing up or what happened years ago, the same events sound very different as different people tell the story? Depending on who’s describing it, the guy who used to live across the street was either a scrooge or a saint; or moving from one town to another was either a disaster, a wonderful escape or no big deal, hardly noticed. Same event, different folks in the family, different points of view.

It’s a lot like the Christmas story, and the three times the Bible tells it. We heard one version on Christmas Eve, the story of the manger and the shepherds and the angels. John’s gospel, read last week, sounds strange to ears more accustomed to crowded inns and angel choirs. And Matthew tells the same sort of story as Luke in the reading today, with Joseph’s dreams, the wise men and the flight to Egypt (some of that a continuation of our reading). But the point of view is different in each story, because different folks in the family are telling the same story.

You see, Luke, who wrote the familiar story we heard on Christmas Eve, was a bit of an historian. He was very concerned with getting the dates and rulers right, and with locating everything in time and space. He also was a gentile, and he was clearly very concerned about people who, like the gentiles, were considered outsiders. So Luke is more interested in shepherds – who were social outcasts – than in kings. And Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary – a radical move since women were even lower on the social ladder than shepherds.

John may have heard of the stories in Matthew and Luke, but he’s not primarily an historian or a Jewish royalist. John is a theologian and a mystic. So he writes of the meaning of Jesus’ birth, and he writes from his theology, and from the holy imagination of his prayers. He begins the story earlier – he reminds us that Christmas really begins where Genesis begins, in the beginning, with God in creation. So, using language evocative of Genesis, John begins by talking about the Word of God. The Word here is God in action, God creating, God revealing himself, the one whom the church has named the second person of the Blessed Trinity. This Word was with God, and this Word was God.

Then John tells the Christmas story – in nine words: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” Soaring words for the most down-to-earth thing that ever happened.

Matthew is more traditional. He was a Jew and may have been a scribe. He was very concerned with making it clear that Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies as the Messiah, the King of the Jews. So shepherds didn’t interest him as much as the royal wise men from the East; instead, the child is surrounded by his peers. And Matthew paid a lot of attention to the flight to Egypt because of the parallel between the Exodus and Jesus’ own return from Egypt to Israel. Also, the more conservative Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s point of view.

In addition to telling the same story, Luke, John and Matthew also share one special way of telling it: There is one image, one symbol, and only one, that they all use to talk about the birth in Bethlehem. Can you think of what it is?

They all talk about light – the light of the star, the light that shone around the shepherds, the true light that enlightens all people. These all echo Isaiah’s vision of vindication shining out like the dawn, of salvation like a burning torch. Where Christ is, people who understand talk about light. They have to – there’s no better image of what’s going on. The light shines in the darkness, John proclaims. And somehow we understand this, and we understand that this truth cannot be better expressed in any other words, with any other image.

In large part, I suspect we understand this because we know about darkness; we know what it’s like to live in and with darkness. Remember what it’s like to try to walk through an unfamiliar room that is completely dark, or to wake up confused in the middle of the night in someone else’s house, trying to get somewhere.

We know what it’s like when we don’t know where things are, or what we’ve just bumped into, or whether we’re going where we want to go, or if our next step will be OK, or if we will break something and make a mess. We know how easy it is to go in circles in the dark, and to get turned around, and to stub a toe and get angry and hit whatever’s handy.

And we know what it is like to live like this in broad daylight.

What Luke and John and Matthew all say about Christmas is that a new light begins to shine. Gradually, quietly, but with absolute certainty, and by that light we can begin to see.

By that light we can begin to see who we are and who we are created to be. For it is in the person of Jesus that what it means to be a human being is finally made clear. In him we see that our lives are made whole only as we surrender in love and service; in him we see that really being alive means risking everything for – and because of – the love of God and the Kingdom of God.

In him we see that hope never needs to be abandoned – never – and that we contain possibilities beyond our imagining.

Also, by that light that has come into the world we begin to see God clearly for the first time. “No one has ever seen God,” John reminds us. But God is made known to us in Jesus. This means that everything we ever thought about God, everything we had figured out, everything that we were sure we knew about God – all of this is put to the test in Jesus. Who God is, in relationship to us, is fully revealed in Jesus. Not in one saying or one parable, or one miracle, but in all of Jesus – in his life, his ministry, his teaching, his death and resurrection; in all these things we finally have the light we need to see God.

The light of Christ, the Word made flesh, comes among us at Christmas, and we celebrate its coming into the world. God has revealed himself and his love to us in Christ.

That first Christmas, the light shone – and it continues to shine. By that light we have been given the power to become children of God and to take our places with the light.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. We have seen the star. This is the Christmas story. This is our story.

All of those other lights – the ones on trees, shopping centers, houses and office buildings – these are, at best, faint reminders of the light we celebrate during this holy season, the new light that shines from Bethlehem and from the very heart of God that is our gift, our legacy, and – always – our sacred calling to name and to share.

There is a poem that I’ve read here before, that was on a Christmas card I received some years ago. It is about naming our calling, and I would like to share it. It is by Howard Thurman (1899-1981) called ‘The Work of Christmas:’

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the Kings and Princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flocks,

The work of Christmas begins –

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To teach the nations,

To bring Christ to all,

To make music in the heart.