



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas 1

The Same Story

[RCL]: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147 or 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

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 a scrooge or a saint. Moving from one town to another was either a disaster, a wonderful escape, or a thing indifferent, hardly noticed. Same event, different folks in the family, different point of view, radically different ways of telling the same story.

Consider the wonderful poetry of those first 18 verses of John's Gospel we just heard. This is the Christmas story, the third time the Bible tells it. It is the same story we may have heard on Christmas Eve—the story of the manger and the shepherds and the angels—and it's the same story Matthew tells in his gospel—with Joseph's dreams, the wise men and the flight to Egypt. But the point of view is different, and John's Gospel sounds strange to ears more accustomed to crowded inns and angel choirs. That's because different folks in the family are telling the same story.

You see, Luke, who wrote the familiar story of 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. Also, he may have been a gentile convert, and he was very concerned about the role of people who, like him, were considered outsiders. So, Luke is more concerned with shepherds—who were social outcasts—than about kings. And Luke focuses on the perspective of Mary—a radical move since women were even lower on the social ladder than shepherds.

Matthew is more traditional. He was certainly 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 Messiah, King of Jews. So, shepherds didn't interest him as much as the royal wise men, and he paid a lot of attention to the flight to Egypt because of the parallel between the Exodus led by Moses and Jesus' own return from Egypt to Israel. Also, the more traditional Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's point of view.

Then there was John. John may well have read Matthew and Luke and, if so, he assumes that we have, too. But John is a theologian and a mystic. So, he isn't concerned with historical details. Instead, he writes of

the *meaning* of Jesus' birth, and he writes from his theology, and from the holy imagination of his prayers. But he is still telling the same story—all three are talking about the same birth—all three are saying the same thing.

John 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 the first verses of Genesis, John begins by talking about the beginning, and about the Word of God. “The Word” here is God in action, God creating, God revealing himself. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. Then he tells the Christmas story—in nine words (in the Greek and English). “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” He who was with God in creation, the one who *is* God revealing himself to humanity—this one became a person, became flesh—as completely human as you and I. Not God with a people-suit disguise on; not a really good person who God rewarded and made special; not a super angel God created early and saved up for Bethlehem.

But a person, who was the Word—who was God's own self. (A chip off the old block.) Soaring words for the most down-to-earth thing that ever happened. But it's still the Christmas story, still the story Matthew and Luke tell—the story of the birth of Jesus.

In addition to telling the same story, Matthew, Luke, and John also share one special way of telling it—there is one image, one symbol, and only one, that they all use to talk about that 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 everyone. They all continue Isaiah's vision of light shining on those who live in darkness. Where Christ is, people who understand talk about light. They have to—there is no better image of what is 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.

In large part, we understand this because we know about darkness—we know what it is like to live in and with darkness. Remember what it's like to try to walk through an unfamiliar place when it's really 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, and we don't know what we have just bumped into, or whether we're going to get where we want to go, or if the 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 is handy.

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

What John and Luke and Matthew all say about Christmas is that a light begins to shine—suddenly, 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 fully a human

being is finally made clear. In him, we see that our lives are made whole as we surrender them 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 need never 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. So, everything we 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 him: in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Through all of these together, we finally have the light 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 had revealed himself and his love to us in Christ. That first Christmas, the stable stank but the light shone—and it continues to shine. It continues to allow us to see—and to show a world living in darkness what we have seen. For by that light we have been given power to become children of God—and to take our places with the light. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The Rev. James Liggett is the retired Rector of St. Nicholas' Episcopal Church in Midland, Texas. He is a native of Kansas and a graduate of the University of Houston and the Episcopal Divinity School. He has served parishes in Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma.