

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
Austin, Texas
The Rev. Deacon Chris Duncan
Christmas 1 (Year C), John 1:1-18
December 27, 2009

Sanctify us, O Lord, in truth. Your word is truth. Amen.

Good Morning and Merry Christmas!

In the small town of Richmond, TX, where I grew up my family became quite infamous as a result of one of our somewhat “unconventional” Christmas traditions.

My family left our decorated Christmas tree up year round. As stands now, the tree has come down only once in the last fifteen years and it was a brief hiatus. Yes, in my parents’ home the Christmas tree welcomes all guests from its prominent spot in the living room.

Now, as you can imagine, this sparked a bit of controversy in our neighborhood when I was younger. During spring break or summer vacation my friends would come over and would naturally ask “You still have your Christmas tree up?” To which my parents would respond, “No! You mean your family hasn’t put yours up yet for this coming Christmas?” I would imagine there were some phone calls from annoyed parents once my friends went home. To this day I am still not really sure whether my parents keep their tree up year-round to continue the Christmas spirit well beyond the season, to begin celebrating Christmas early, or if it is just their way to get out of the hassle of packing away the tree and setting it back up again year in, year out. I guess it just depends on who you asked.

Nonetheless, I find it funny that we as a society start so early in building up for Christmas – even as early as October the stores begin to stock Christmas decorations. Then as soon as December 25th comes we move forward as quickly as possible. It is as if we are trying to leave Christmas in our rearview mirror. Culture has taken Advent and turned it into the 25 days of Christmas with heartfelt and tear jerking movies every night so that once Christmas actually comes we are in fact ready to turn our attention to that ever popular secular holiday: New Years.

And what about the hope, the expectation, the waiting we were supposed to experience during Advent? Well, we had waiting but it was mostly experienced with annoyance in traffic and in store lines. With Christmas finally here, the Advent waiting is over but are we still celebrating the nativity of our Lord?

Christmas: the moment the creator entered his creation. He came not as a god on Mount Olympus or a king upon a golden throne, but as a fragile and innocent baby. Singer/Songwriter Bebo Norman writes: “And all fell silent for the cry of an infant, the voice of God was dividing history for those with eyes to see, the Son would shine from earth that night... and the angels filled the sky all of heaven wondered why, why their

King would choose to be, be a baby born to die.” Christmas: the moment the creator entered his creation. We, the Church, serve as witnesses to this truth, to this incarnation.

In the readings on this first Sunday of Christmas, we do not find a baby in a manger. We do not find the shepherds or wise men to which we have grown accustomed. Instead we hear “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” These words point to Genesis and creation rather than our traditional Christmas stories. What we find is that these first 18 verses of the Gospel of John serve as a prologue. We find that it is John’s own poetic telling of the nativity, of the Word and the Word becoming flesh. One way to look at the Prologue is to see it as a musical overture providing a summation of the Gospel. One still needs the rest of the Gospel to get the full picture just as someone needs the rest of a musical performance.

What John so poetically calls “the Word” is the source of light and life. It is with God and it is God. As people of flesh, as an incarnational people we define the world around us with our five senses. And there it is... sound... the sound of an old barn creaking in the wind, the sound of a baby crying, the sound of farm animals around a manger, the sound of people talking and coming to pay homage to a small infant. Yet, the Word is more than sound. The Word became flesh thus incorporated our other senses: touch, sight, taste, and smell. And we as the Church testify to this Word.

John’s prologue shows us that the story of Jesus is ultimately not just a story about Jesus; it is the story of God and God’s creation. All of Scripture shares the story of God’s self revealing to his creation and here in John’s Gospel we hear of the creator in creation. John writes, “And the Word became flesh and lives among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” This use of the word “we” is also interesting. “We have seen his glory.” We, the reader, join in the confession of Jesus Christ. With the author’s use of the word “we,” the reader enters the text as a participant and is made a witness.

We are given an example of what a witness does through the mentioning of John the Baptist. Due to years of hearing stories of the Baptist, our imaginations immediately begin to run wild with visions of a man wearing camel hair clothes, eating locusts, all the while preaching and baptizing at the Jordan. Yet, the Gospel writer does not place the Baptist in any kind of geographical location at this time. In fact we know very little of the Baptist from these verses except that he is sent from God, that his name is John, and most importantly that he came to bear witness to the light.

This is our calling as Christian and in this Christmas season: to bear witness to the light. But what is it that makes someone a witness? In very simple terms a witness is a person who experiences an event and reports what took place. It is important to note that there are two parts to being a witness. First, the person does not simply testify to whatever they desire. No, a witness testifies to the truth as they experienced. Second, a witness does not experience something and then tell no one. Rather, the person reports what happened. Both experiencing and testifying are necessary to bearing witness to the truth.

In reflecting on what it means to be a witness to the Word, to God, several things stand out. First, the testimony is about God's claim upon life. In other words, God is the one who truth is proclaimed about through the testimony. Also, the purpose of the testimony is proclamation to all people. We witness to people in hope that they might grow in their belief and understanding. Finally, our testimony about God is not merely one of words. Rather being a witness demands a total commitment of speech and action when we witness to God.

Today we typically envision witnesses as on the stand in a daunting courtroom with Matlock or Perry Mason as the lawyers. We see images of judgment and law. Yet, it is the witnesses' testimony that helps the truth to be known. The witness is not necessarily the one with rank and power but is the one who has authority because of the truth that has been seen, heard, and felt. We testify to the encounter between God and ourselves and share the truth with the world through our words and actions.

We are confessors of Jesus Christ and the Word made flesh. We are not simply listeners to another narrative. It is not ourselves that we testify to but to the creator who loved us and entered his creation for our sake.

“And Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”

Christmas: the moment the creator entered his creation.

Merry Christmas!