

“...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

Good morning. Merry Christmas! It is still Christmas, you know. Despite what the retailers try to tell us, the twelve days of Christmas are not a countdown to December 25<sup>th</sup> in which we need to ramp up and buy something every day. No the twelve days started last Wednesday evening and will continue to January 5<sup>th</sup>. So if you can't keep up your Christmas tree and outdoor decorations until then (because you may get a notice from your HOA), at least keep out the manger scene in your home until then.

One of the traditions many of us associate with Christmas is the story of the birth of Jesus from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. You know, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...” We know it from the years of Christmas pageants we have seen, like the wonderful pageant we had this past Wednesday. Or perhaps we know it from Linus' speech at the end of “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” It is a beautiful and powerful story with layers of meaning for us who seek to know Christ.

Another lesser known tradition is that on Christmas Day and the first Sunday of Christmas, the church directs another version of the Christmas story to be read and preached—what is known as the prologue of the Gospel of John. It is written more like a modern poem than the script of a Christmas pageant. It is more theology than story, but equally important to help us to understand who Jesus is and what that understanding means for how we worship God and live out our faith in Christ.

John's version of the origins of Jesus Christ is very different from the other three canonical Gospel. Luke's story, as I've said, most of us know. Matthew's version focuses more on Joseph, the husband of Mary, with stories of his dreams and holy angels portraying the complexity of his calling and role as foster father and human protector of God's Son. Mark's version just begins with John and Jesus as adults, stirring up the countryside of Judea and Galilee with their message of repentance.

In John, we hear of the preexistence of Christ as the Word of God. The Church would spend centuries unpacking what that term means theologically. It is worth spending time in EFM or seminary exploring what it means for us in understanding God as Trinity and Christ as both fully human and fully divine. But back then at the time John's Gospel was written; the author took a Greek term “Λόγος,” that we translate into English as “Word,” and used it to

describe Christ's preexistence before there was ever the human man, Jesus. In Hebrew tradition, Λογος was the term for God's Wisdom, somehow distinct from yet connected eternally with God. A passage in the book of Proverbs uses images for Wisdom that it is like a child playing before God and like an architect for God, designing the creation.

John takes that image of Λογος, Wisdom, or the Word, and tells us that the Word, the unique child of God and co-creator with God of the Universe, and in fact in some mysterious way we do not understand, God, God's self; that God became human, became one of us. Amazing! Now we can begin with EFM or a course in seminary and take the rest of our earthly life and not understand all that this insight from John means for our shared faith and common life. But there are a few things we can take home with us today.

John's Gospel proclaims and the church teaches that God became human in Jesus Christ. That means two things for us as people who follow Jesus. First, if we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus. There are all sorts of images we have about God from our culture and imaginations, some of them rooted in the Bible. Those images show God in all sorts of ways—from angry tyrant to benevolent old man, from impersonal force to inoffensive sugar daddy, and many more. Some give us glimpses of the truth of God; others tell us more about the people portraying their view of God than the true God.

But because we believe God became human in Jesus, if we want to understand God, we can look to Jesus—his character, his teaching, his actions. J.B. Phillips said described Jesus as "God in focus." Jesus displayed deep compassion, reaching out and healing people who were hurting, especially those who were on the margins of society. So that lets us know who God is. Jesus became righteously angry at the powerful that used their power to advance their own agenda and prestige instead of using it to help those folks they were responsible for as leaders. Jesus became especially angry at religious leaders and teachers that abused their power. So that lets us know who God is. And Jesus sacrificed his life to bring truth and redemption to the world, taking the worst that the powerful could do to him and turning it into a way to bring reconciliation and peace between God and humanity and also among humanity. So that too lets us know who God is. If you want to know who God is, learn about and follow Jesus.

That is amazing. The second thing to know because God became human in Jesus is that being human is honorable and holy. If the Word deigned to be one of us, then being human is not something to regret or excuse; it is a calling to live into fully by God's grace. And the grace we need to do that comes from trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior and following him as our Lord. That same list that describes Jesus and tells us about God—Jesus' compassion, justice, and courage—also tells us about who we are to be.

In addition, because God became human, it lets us know that our humanity is a means of grace even when we are not as good and holy as Jesus. Humanity—each one of us

individually and all of us in the rich tapestry of our relationships and communities—is raw material for God’s grace. That sense of the divine embodied in the human was first revealed in the earliest verses of the Bible when we are told that we are made in God’s image. And in the story of God made human in Jesus, we learn again that human beings can be a sacrament of God’s presence. So when we look at a little baby, we see the reflection of God. When we see a young mother caring for her child, we see a reflection of God. When we see a father protecting his family, we see a reflection of God.

And we see God revealed in humanity in other ways too, beyond those beautiful and powerful archetypes. We can see God in an alcoholic who is lost and seeking a way back to sobriety. Even at his lowest point, that person still has human dignity, can still say and do and be things that reflect God’s glory. And even in his weakness, his life pulls something out of us who care for him that can be good and holy and life changing, for him and for us.

This view of humanity can be life changing for us. Saints in earlier eras of the church said that we should bow with reverence when we greet each other because of how we carry God’s image in us. Think about that! And beyond that outward gesture of bowing in respect to God’s image in our brother or sister, our belief about what it means to be human can affect us and our relationships in other ways. When someone is annoying us, our first response shouldn’t be anger or dismissal or mockery; but rather silence, patient inquiry to better understand, and a sincere desire to honor the other person, even when our first reaction is very different. Our entire path through life is an opportunity to learn about God and God’s way through our relationship with our fellow humans.

God being revealed in Jesus Christ; and through God’s grace, God also being revealed in each of us and all of us, makes for a merry Christmas indeed. It reminds me of a conversation I had one day with a teenager. That young person was letting me know that she had doubts about the existence of God. Those doubts are a good thing, a lifelong and close companion of faith; but when we first meet them, they can feel disorienting to the faith we learned from our parents and the church.

This young person wanted proof about the existence of God. Now that very good question can be answered in many different ways. But here is the answer that came to my mind. I told that young person to look at his grandparents, faithful Christians for decades. Look at the details of their lives—not just that they are good people, but they are faithful people. They come to church and sing and worship God revealed in Jesus. They study the life of Jesus and pray and talk with other believers who do the same. They go out on cold mornings to take care of people who need a hot meal and some groceries to take home. They raised their children to love others because that is what Jesus taught. They have also failed more than once

in their lives; but when that failure involved hurting someone, they demonstrated humility and asked for forgiveness and sought to heal a broken relationship.

In big and small ways, that child's grandparents revealed God to the world as they sought to follow Jesus Christ by faith. When you look at them and their lives, you have one of the best proofs I know of God's existence. It is more real and powerful than the most elegant philosophical argument. And it is something—someone-- we can know and a way we can follow in our day to day lives, so that we can embody who we believe God is and what we believe God wants for our world.

That truth is the power of God-made-human that we believe and celebrate this Christmas season. It is glorious good news! That is the highest good of what we mean when we say, "Merry Christmas!" Amen.