

CHRISTMAS 2C

January 3, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Jeremiah 31:7—14 Psalm 147:12—20 Ephesians 1:3—14 ***John 1:1—18***

Logos

In our Advent class – *Christmas: The Real Story* – we spent some time looking at the nativity narratives in the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We first noted that Mark – the oldest of the Gospels – doesn't tell us the story of Jesus' birth. When we first encounter Jesus in Mark's gospel he is a grown man.

Now imagine you are living in the first century. You're beginning to hear things about this strange and mysterious person, Jesus. You might have even attended a meeting at which stories about him were told. Perhaps, even, someone read Mark's gospel to the group. In seeking to learn more about this person, Jesus, what are some of the first questions you're liable to ask? Might they be:

- + Who were his parents?
- + Where was he born?

This is precisely where Matthew, probably the second oldest gospel, begins his story of Jesus. He tells us that Jesus' parents were Joseph and Mary, and that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He even tells us another interesting story surrounding Jesus' birth, about some wise men coming from the east because they'd seen a sign that a great king would be born.

Luke, probably the last of the synoptic gospels, then fills in for us the remaining details of Jesus' birth. Luke answers the question: Where is Jesus from? Not only does Luke tell us that Mary and Joseph were Jesus' parents, and that he was born in Bethlehem, but also that his parents were from the town of Nazareth. And, Luke tells us a few more stories about Jesus' birth and early childhood, such as the visit by the shepherds and angels, and Jesus' requisite presentation in the temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law.

But it wasn't enough for Matthew and Luke to simply tell us who Jesus' parents were and where they were from. They also needed to tell us his genealogy. This is important to demonstrate that Jesus stands in the royal line of David, and is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy regarding the Messiah. Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham, the patriarch of the Israelites. Luke traces all the way back to Adam, the father of all humanity.

So here we are today, with this curious beginning to John's gospel, filled with symbolism and poetic language. What is John trying to tell us?

In short, this is the nativity – the birth of Jesus – according to St. John.

John begins with the genealogy of Jesus: *In the beginning was the Word*. This is Jesus – in Greek, the *Logos* – the Word. John recalls the story of creation in Genesis: *In the beginning...* And in the beginning, Jesus was there. *And the Word – Jesus – was with God, and the Word – Jesus – was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

Recall the story of the creation. God spoke all of life into existence. God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light [Genesis 1:3]. God spoke the sky into existence [Gen. 1:6]; the seas and dry land [Gen. 1:9]; the sun, moon, and stars [Gen. 1:14]; the animals [Gen. 1:20, 24]; and finally, people [Gen. 1:26]. All of these came into being through the creative power of God's word. *All things came into being through him – Jesus – and without him not one thing came into being.*

What has come into being in him was life. Now, in the person of Jesus, not only has all life come into being, but life eternal is now ours. *The life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness* of our sinful, broken humanity, *and the darkness did not overcome it.*

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Now that I've explained it this way, do these first few verses from the Gospel of John make any more sense to you than they did before? These words might be somewhat foreign to us, but John was using images and symbols that would have been very familiar to his first-century audience. They were a people who would have been familiar with a multiplicity of religions, not unlike ourselves living today. While we are Christians, most of us have at least a passing familiarity with Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and a number of other religions.

So, too, John's hearers would have had at least a passing familiarity with Judaism, Roman religion and Greek philosophy. His Romanized, Hellenistic hearers would have immediately recognized the *Logos*, also known in Greek philosophy as *Sophia*, and said, "Yes, we know *Sophia*. *Sophia* teaches us how to live a fulfilled life."

Similarly, John's Jewish audience would have heard John speak of the *Logos* and said, "Yes, we know the *Logos*! That's the Wisdom spoken of in the Scriptures. Wisdom teaches us how to live a righteous life."

And yet, this is not what John is saying. John is borrowing familiar imagery in order to communicate a new message. The *Logos* – Jesus – is all this, and more. The *Logos* is not only a way of life: Jesus *is* life. The path to life is no longer defined by knowing a series of rules for fulfilled or righteous living; the path to life is knowing a person, Jesus.

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So in John's nativity story could there possibly be a lesson for us modern-day Christians? Could we possibly adopt some of our modern-day imagery in a new way, a way that is yet faithful to the story of what God has done for us in Jesus, in order to better reach non-Christians with the story of Jesus?

The ministry review team spent a few weeks in December evaluating our works as a congregation over the past 15 months. One of the things to come out of these conversations is the need for me to learn more about developments in worship practices throughout the country. We would be seeking ways to better reach people where they are at – much like John did in his gospel when he borrowed well-known symbols – in order to better spread the gospel. We might seek to incorporate some of these practices into our worship life, but only those things which are an authentic expression of worship for our congregation. Please let me know if you might be interested in joining me in this work.

Another thing to come out of these conversations is that every one of us should be an evangelist. Every member of our congregation needs to be out in the world, telling the story of what God has done for humanity, and more specifically, what God has done for each of us individually.

We all have a story to tell. Each one of us has been touched by the love of God in Jesus Christ, or else we probably wouldn't be here in worship today. But perhaps the problem in telling your story is that you don't have the words to tell it. We're going to be spending some time this year talking about how to help you discover your own personal faith story. And we'll also talk about how to put that story together in words that are easy to tell and that faithfully represent what the Word, Jesus – the *Logos* – has done for you.

Abiding Peace has a nearly forty year history in Budd Lake of providing a safe place for people to grow in faith. But just as God was active in creation in the *Logos* – speaking and creating through Jesus – we who have been gathered in this place need to be active in love, active in sharing the faith that God has given us. There are yet too many people in our world who walk in darkness, who have not seen the light and life of Jesus. And it's up to us to tell them.

I look forward to working with you all this year to help us discover new and faithful ways of communicating God's redemptive love to and for our community.

Amen.

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