

First Sunday After Christmas - 2019

Sr. Linda-Susan and I went into a store yesterday to get some marked-down Poinsettias - and everything “Christmas” had disappeared. Now the wares in the store shouted, “Valentine’s Day!” It was, indeed, a boon to us that the commercial Christmas was in the past, only a few days after the day itself. But it also heightened for me the need for this *season* of Christmas liturgically as a way for us to reflect on what effect Christmas has on our lives. It drew me to a line from Luke’s account of the nativity. After all the fanfare of the angels singing to the shepherds, and the shepherds coming to the manger and sharing what the angels had said, and just before we hear that the shepherds went off glorifying God, we are told, “*But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*” That is what these days of Christmas are for, after the fanfare and hoopla and excitement. Here we have a time to treasure all these things and ponder them in our hearts. We are invited, if you will, to wrestle with the question – “What does it all mean?”

To that end, I think, the church gives us this gospel passage from John – John, the mystic, the one who has indeed pondered in his heart. He no doubt knew the stories of the birth of Jesus as given by Luke and Matthew, with the manger and its animals, the choirs of angels, the light of the star, the magi traveling from afar. And John boils it all down to this: In the beginning was the Word – the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. And the word took flesh and dwelt among us.”

A more literal translation, though, would be, “The word became flesh – and *pitched a tent* among us.” What a difference translation can make! An Afro-Caribbean Episcopal priest now serving in Massachusetts, Edwin Johnson, has this to say: “So where does the ‘tent’ connection really come from? Linguistically and conceptually a ‘dwelling’ for the Jewish people was a tent. To dwell with was to pitch a tent. Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem and long before the Jews built their Temple, they were a moving people who lived in tents.”

Johnson goes on to describe how these nomadic people lived in tents and carried the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of God, with them in its own tent. But when they set up camp, the Tent for the Ark of the Covenant, called the Tabernacle, was set up away from all the other tents, in a special place. And only certain people, in special circumstances, were allowed to enter that special tent, the Tabernacle. So although in their understanding, God traveled with them, God's dwelling, God's tent, was set apart. There was a barrier between the Holy and everyone else. Johnson says, "You see, by making God's tent so different, so far away, and so exclusive they were making it pretty clear that their lives, their ordinary selves, where they lived and what they did were mundane, even profane. Only the exclusive people, places, and things were Holy and worthy of God."

John tells us, in this gospel passage, that in Jesus, God has pitched a tent *among* us. In Jesus, God has moved the holy from the realm of some separate, exclusive space into the mundane circumstances of our day-to-day lives. John has taken what we were told in the other stories of the birth of Jesus – Jesus being born in a barn stall with animals all around, with both shepherds and magi as witnesses – and distilled the truth present there. As Johnson puts it, "The mundane and profane people and circumstances that were excluded from the Tabernacle were the exact people and circumstances included and recognized as Holy in the presence of Christ."

What this tells us is that we cannot legitimately separate what is of God and what is not. John says everything was created through this Word that pitched a tent among us. No longer is God far away. No, God has – God *is* – present in the mundane *and* the extraordinary, the *profane* and the holy.

The great church Father, Irenaeus, said it this way, "The Word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for mankind, became what we are in order to make us what He is Himself."

The Incarnation tells us both who God is – and who we are.

The infancy narratives tell us a great deal... that God comes in unexpected places, that God is found in the weak and helpless infant, that God shares in the suffering of the immigrant and the homeless, that God comes for *all* people as the wise persons from afar recognize the Divine, too. And they tell us that God has pitched a tent among us, has enfleshed Godself in our very being.

We heard from the prophet Isaiah:

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

The garden can only bring forth what is already sown in it – and so it is with us. What is sown in us is the Spirit, the Divine Spark, from the heart of God. It is for us to let it spring up and come forth in our lives. The feast of the Incarnation is our feast, too.

Let us continue to pray, as we did in the opening Collect: Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; Through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

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