

## First Sunday After Christmas – Year C

Thank God that the “big feasts” last more than one day in the church calendar! The fact that we celebrate Christmas as a season instead of a day gives us the chance to absorb more of the feast... a chance to reflect more on its meaning. So don't begrudge our continued singing of Christmas carols or Scripture readings that focus on the Incarnation. We *need* this time.

Today's Gospel from John includes the portion that served as our Gospel on Christmas morning – the message at the heart of our celebration of the Incarnation: 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.” And then it includes four additional verses: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

This is the message we need to hold onto, to hear again and again, not just during these days of Christmastide, but *every* day. And I say this because we tend to get it backwards. We tend to carry around some pre-formed idea or image of God, and then try to figure out how to make Jesus fit into that. But what the Incarnation tells us, what our belief in Incarnation insists that we do is look first to Jesus, the Christ – and see there the image of who God *really* is.

As I drove down and back from Indiana this week to visit my mom, I saw a billboard that said, “Judgment is near! Prepare to meet thy God!” A second billboard read: “Jesus is coming! Are YOU prepared??” I knew the ‘tone’ of these messages because of the bold, menacing style of the type face, the colors and graphics on the signs. They definitely communicated the message that God was an authoritative critic, ready to render judgment on His subjects. Certainly, a law-and-order God.

Baylor University professors Paul Froese and Christopher Bader identified four “images” of God in their 2010 book, **America's Four Gods: What We Say about God-- & what that Says about Us**. It’s an interesting read. There is the Authoritative God, the Benevolent God, the Critical God, and the Distant God. Which one is the “right” one? What is the truth? John tells us, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ...” Note that he does not say ONLY through Jesus Christ – God reveals Godself in many ways to many people.

My point here, though, is that as Christians, as believers in the Incarnation, we need to form our image of God from what we see in Jesus. That’s the message we hear this morning in John’s Gospel: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

John tells us: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

The letter to the Galatians is trying to communicate the same thing: “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”

An image of God as a disciplinarian, a distant controller ready to mete out judgment based on infractions of the law, is not the God revealed in Jesus. Our status is not that of subjects who must obey or be punished. No, our status, revealed in Jesus, is that “From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” And that grace brings us into an *intimate* relationship with God. We are not here, we are not created for the *law*, but for relationship. And we look to Jesus to see what that relationship looks like: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live in my love.... Love one another, as I have loved you.”

And that brings forth yet another truth embedded in the Incarnation: Our image of God, *any* image of God, is incomplete if it is only about God and me. For the Incarnation reveals a God whose justice is mercy, whose light shines in *darkness* – and whose means of acting in the world is through *our* actions, our living out our baptismal covenant relationship in the recognition that my relationship with God also includes my relationship with each person and all of creation.

John tells us that Jesus, close to the Father's heart, has made God known. So when we look at the Gospels, one question always before us is, what does this tell us about the heart of God? The infancy narratives from the other gospels 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 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](#)