In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.  
All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.  

(John 1:1-5, NRSV)

Years ago, I got myself into hot water with one of the mothers in a congregation where I served as priest. That year, for the Christmas Eve service attended by her daughter and other children of the congregation, we did not read the Christmas story as it is told in Luke’s gospel. Instead (how dare I!) we read it from John’s gospel. No angels, shepherds or magi. No Mary, Joseph, stable or animals. How was her daughter to learn the real story, she asked me!

At that time I was reminded, and am reminded again now, of an essay titled “Air For Two Voices” written by Frederick Buechner and published in A Room Called Remember (1984). In that essay, Buechner contrasts the two voices he finds present in the prologue to John’s gospel, the one described as “a voice chanting, a cantor’s voice, a muezzin’s voice, a poet’s voice, a choirboy’s voice before it has changed” and the other he describes as “insistent and overearnest, a little nasal. It is a voice that wants to make sure, a voice that’s trying hard to get everything straight. It is above all a down-to-earth voice.”

It is in these voices that I hear the whole of the Christmas story. Matthew and Luke mostly attend to the “down-to-earth” details while John beautifully proclaims the poetic language of the Word, of life and of light in the darkness but not overcome by it.

When we hear of Mary and Joseph and the child born to them, let us remember that God’s love for us is so great that God took on flesh and lived in our midst in the most vulnerable of ways. God’s love is still present, living in the midst of our families and human communities.

When we hear of the shepherds, let us remember that Jesus’ birth took place in the midst of common folks, going about their everyday business. Our faith in this child of God must certainly be a “down-to-earth” faith that informs the living of our everyday lives.

When we hear of the magi and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, let us remember that this child’s birth had an impact even on the most learned and powerful people of society. In Jesus, we can find meaning and purpose for our own lives, even in the face of “wisdom” that might advise us to abandon religious convictions, and we can find the strength we need to challenge the powers and principalities of our own times, when it is necessary to do so.
When we hear of the holy family’s flight into Egypt to escape Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, let us remember that the light of God’s love was not overcome by darkness, and trust that God’s light will not be overcome by the darkness that we encounter in today’s world. In the face of violence, racism, poverty and terrorism let us point to the light of God that shines in the darkness, and allow that same light to shine through our own lives.

Together, as we celebrate Christmas, let us listen for all of the voices that proclaim the story of God’s incarnate love for us. May the joy of this holy season pour out from our lives into the world for which God’s love took flesh in the birth of Jesus.

Christmas blessings to all of you from me, and from all of our staff at Diocesan House!

Rob

The Rt. Rev. Rob Skirving
Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina