

This Is Our Story

Christmas Eve Candlelight Eucharist

Text: Micah 5:5; John 1:14, 18

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Spring Lake, Michigan

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I had a very easy morning; I didn't have to preach, so I was able to sit where you sit and to take in the wonder of the story in song, pageantry, drama, and as I sat there, I was very much aware of the fact that that is precisely the way the Christmas mystery ought to be experienced. That is the way it is best presented; that is the way it is best appropriated. It is a beautiful story and it can best be sung. Of course, eventually it catches up with me and here I am, trying to preach about it again. But, let me contrast for you the story as it was dramatically, musically, instrumentally set forth, and the account which we read a moment ago in John's Gospel.

The drama, the pageant, of course, is from the birth stories of Matthew and of Luke, principally Luke's story, the shepherds and angels and the virgin with the baby boy, but, also from Matthew the kings, and in those birth stories we have the story form. Can't you feel the contrast with the reading of the first chapter of John, prologued in this Gospel, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. All things were made through him and apart from him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of humankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never comprehended it."

Then the little historical paragraph about John the Baptist, but then again the statement, "This was the true light that enlightens everyone that was coming into the world." And then another historical reference, "He came to his own and his own received him not," and that marvelous, climactic statement - "The word became flesh and dwelt among us."

You don't have to be a rocket scientist or a literary critic to feel the contrast between Luke's marvelous story and John's more philosophical or theological presentation of exactly the same event. In Luke, it is story, and on Christmas Eve we're here to celebrate this, our story. It is a particular kind of story. Some would call it a myth, but it is not really myth in a technical sense, because it refers to

historical events. This was the time of Caesar Augustus and Herod and his brutal reign. It happened at a particular place and in a particular social context, so the story is rooted historically. But, it is not just documentary history, either. It is not the kind of historical account, for example, if one would visit France and the Normandy Beach area and take in that marvelous museum that was built for the 50th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, where one becomes in a cinematic production, as it were, a very part of that climactic moment of the Second World War. That is not the kind of history it is, either. It is a story that is rooted in history about real history and real people, but it is told with legendary accoutrements that make it into a marvelous tale, as it were.

John does not tell the story. John philosophically, theologically looks behind the story to its meaning. But, John and Matthew and Luke are trying to give expression to the same mystery, the mystery of Christmas that we celebrate tonight. This is our story. It is our story. It is not the only story. There are other peoples of other times and other places who have stories, too, and those stories also reflect their deepest intuitions about what is at the center of things, deep down. But, this is our story and it is a marvelous story. It is a beautiful story. It is a story with a profound meaning. This is our story and it tells us about the nature of God.

John in his more philosophical, theological presentation reaches behind the story to say that what the story is about, what Luke wrote about the shepherds, the angels in the night, the virgin Mary giving birth to a child in a cattle stall, is the birth of one who is truly human, but in whose humanity there was an intensification of luminosity, of revelation so that he could say that that word that was in the beginning with God, which could also be translated the divine intention, in this moment in history, was enfleshed so that in the humanity of this one who was born, who came to maturity, those who saw him and were encountered by him could do no other than to say, "My God."

The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and John says no one has ever seen God, but this one shows us who God is. This one, in human flesh, is the self-expression of God. This one sounded like God. This one acted like God. What one experiences in this one is what one experiences in God and, maybe most profoundly, John would say that in the manner of this one's revelation, humble birth as a child, one has an insight into the nature of God, which is love revealed in all of the vulnerability of a child. The nature of God read in a human birth. The being of God revealed in a child. The love and the vulnerability of a child's birth, the ultimate revelation of that which is at the core of reality. That is our story. That is what the story says. It's a wonderful story. It's a beautiful story, and what it tells us is even more wonderful: that at the core of reality is the love unconditional, as wide as creation, that embraces us and will never let us go.

Our story speaks of a God who is love, a love that is vulnerable, and a love that is with us and continues to be available to us in the enfleshment of the other. In the

letter of John we read God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in them, the love of God experienced in human flesh, the ultimate truth about reality, as concrete and real as the person on your right and on your left, God revealed in Jesus, the nature of God, love, present with us. The story tells us what is true everywhere, at all times, and the ultimate, final word is love.

That is our story. It is love that would stop at nothing to live out the embodiment of the heart of God, even to the extent of being broken and poured out in order that finally we earthlings might get it, with the ultimate truth lying in the vulnerability of love, because it's a reflection of the very core of reality. My, my, my, what a story!