

The Feast of the First Sunday after Christmas
Sunday, December 31, 2017
Preached by Lisa M. Erdeljon

This time of year, at Christmas, it seems we are very focused on the Carnate part of the incarnation—the part where Jesus becomes man.

The whole season of Advent is a chance to reflect and anticipate the birth of a baby, right?

And on Christmas, when Jesus is finally born, we lay out the last piece of the manger scene—a little baby, wrapped in swaddling cloth, in a feeding box.

We sing songs about babies—“What Child is This?”—and about a mother and her child—“Mary, did you know?”—and even about how peaceful the baby is when he sleeps—“Silent night.”

And it’s fun to celebrate the birth of a baby—I’m sure all of us have probably bought a gift for a new baby, or looked through a window or visited a hospital room, to get a first glimpse of a new born.

As parents, we count each finger and toe, admiring the beauty of God’s creation in human form.

As siblings, we stare at this new creature, wondering how mum and dad will have enough attention for another human being.

As friends and neighbors, we anticipate pink or blue balloons or cupcakes or fleeting glimpses of the zombie-like parents as they shuffle between feedings and changings and sleepless nights.

A birth is so human. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s the most human thing anyone can do. Every single person here, today, was born.
Every single person here, on earth, was part of a birth.

Birth (and of course death) are perhaps THE defining factors of humanity—of all living beings—of all creation.

But there is one piece about Jesus that I feel like is sometimes overlooked this time of year.

Yes, we all gather at church, or sing Christmas songs about the new born king or Messiah, or remember to say a prayer of thanksgiving for Jesus, but still...

Sometimes I feel like we often overlook the divine part of the whole big picture.

Sometimes, I think that it’s easy to forget that the birth we celebrated last week—the birth of the new-born King, Jesus Christ—it is so much more than just a birth.

Christmas—the birth of Jesus—is also the incarnation of God in human form.

Christmas is not just about a baby, but a Divine Baby! A Divine Baby that, unlike any of us, will one day die and rise again and free **us** from the bondage of **our** sins.

A baby that already knows his fate, and yet lives to die for each of us. Was born to die for each of us.

...

Today's Gospel is an outline of the theology of Jesus as the Incarnate Divine.

In other words, today's reading, from the Gospel of John, outlines the theology behind who Jesus is in relation to the God we often call "the Father".

Of course, if you know your trinity, then you know that Jesus Christ and God "the Father" are the same God, which is exactly what today's reading states.

And if you know Christ's fate, then you understand the language of light and darkness and of knowing and not knowing.

But even if you know all this, even if you understand this passage fully, you may still struggle with holding it all in balance. The balance of both man and God. Of Jesus Christ both fully human and fully divine, as much now, as a new born baby, as he will be when he hangs on a cross on Good Friday and rises again on Easter morning.

...

This passage in John—the very beginning of the Gospel according to John—is called the Prologue.

It is a hymn, and although most scholars believe it is authentically Christian, they also believe it was pulling from Hellenistic philosophical traditions.

It uses words and concepts that Greek thinkers were familiar and comfortable with—explaining in their terms who Jesus was and what Jesus did.

Written in stanza form, it would be easy to remember, and easy to understand—at least in the abstract way.

And it is here, in the Prologue of John, that we get the idea of Jesus Christ as the Word of God. Jesus as *logos*.

<I had a preaching professor say that under no condition should a preacher ever use the original Greek or Hebrew words when preaching on Scripture. I happen to disagree in most cases, but I understand her point. You don't want a language lesson from the pulpit. But in this passage, in John's gospel, the meaning is so wrapped up in the original word choice, that it is virtually impossible to preach it without using Greek words. And so...>

Logos means Word.

And if we look at the first line of today's Gospel, Word is God. Word is with God. Word was at the beginning.

That **word** is *logos*. That *logos* is Jesus.

In the beginning was the **word**. In the beginning was the *logos*. In the beginning was Christ.

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Jesus has been with God from the beginning—and when we celebrate the birth of Christ, on December 25, we are not celebrating the creation of another man or even the creation of a man-God.

We are celebrating the revelation of God, to us, in human form. The revelation of a god that already existed way before 2,000 years ago. And that will continue to exist well past the end of any human life.

...

A little bit farther down in this reading we see the same word:

“And the **Word**/*logos* became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”

And it is from this fullness—from Jesus's completeness as both Divine and Human—that we receive God's grace and God's truth.

The Gospel reading ends with: “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.”

We receive God's grace and truth, as well as knowledge of God's existence, because Jesus—the Word of God—became man—in a form that we know and we understand.

...

A mentor of mine told me a story about her first call as a priest.

She was called to two churches, where she would preach and preside at one on Sunday mornings and at one on Sunday evenings. The two churches were used to sharing one priest, so it wasn't unusual for them.

Both were rural, about an hour outside of Richmond, Virginia, and both were mostly farmers' families. But the two churches could not have been more opposite in a lot of their theologies.

As an example, she told me about how the two churches did their Christmas pageants.

Church number 1 had all the kids participate. Children of all ages ran around the church, the words of the pageant were often shouted by a barely communicating child. Teenagers were there to help “shepherd the crowd”.

And in the middle, the very focus of the whole story, was Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes, laying in a manger.

And this Jesus was very human! The newest, active baby in the church was selected every year, invited to be part of the pageant and play the role of Jesus. Of course it was an honor for the family whose baby got selected.

And every year, it was almost inevitable, that Baby Jesus was anything **but** sweet and innocent during the pageant. Often screaming and fussing and crying. Doing exactly what babies do so well!

--

The other church, though, had a different interpretation. Although children were invited to participate, most of the roles were played by adults. Leaving the minor roles of sheep and angels to those still in school.

And rather than each person saying his or her own lines, the pageant script had a narrator—a strong, powerful voice—who would read the story, as the characters gracefully placed themselves in their proper places.

And there, in the middle of the scene—a manger box. A spot for the baby Jesus to be laid.

But, rather than a baby, this congregation understood Christmas as something slightly different.

Instead, they would have one, single, solitary spotlight, shining straight up from the manger. A beacon of light, to express the presence of the Divine.

...

Neither church pageant is wrong. They are just different.

And those differences are what we get when we read Luke and Matthew’s Christmas gospels compared to today’s Gospel—from John.

This is John’s Christmas Gospel—the gospel of a “true light, which enlightens everyone, [that came] into the world.”

Sometimes it’s easy to forget that Jesus is both simultaneously man and God. Sometimes it’s easy to let one hypostasis—one essence, one substance of existence—over shadow the other. Sometimes it’s easy to only think about that cute, little, innocent, cooing baby, wrapped in swaddling cloth, held tight to his mother, exposed to the world for the first time.

And sometimes, it's easier to only think about the Divine—the way, the truth, the light, he who is begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Sometimes it's easier to have that abstract and unfocused image of something out there beyond us.

But today's Christmas Gospel reading, balanced with the Christmas Gospel readings of Matthew and Luke—these are both who Jesus is. These are both who Jesus was when he was born and laid in a manger. These are both who Jesus was when he hung on a cross and died and rose again. These are both who Jesus was when he walked on water or shared his Last Supper or healed the sick or wept for Lazarus.

Jesus was and is—always has been and always will be—both man and Divine.

And while we are busy singing lullabies to the little baby, wrapped in swaddling cloth, laying in a manger, John reminds us that we must also be prepared to receive the Divine *logos* of God, accepting Him as true God, accepting His power to create in us Children of God, accepting His glory and His grace in our hearts.

“In the beginning was the Word—was the *logos*, was Jesus Christ—and he was with God, and he was God.”

“And the Word—the *logos*, Jesus Christ—became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth!”

Jesus is here! Christ is born!

Alleluiah!

Amen.