

Christmas 2, January 3, 2021 (John 1:1-9, 10-18; Jer 31:7-14; Eph 1:3-14)

The holy gospel according to John, the 1st chapter (1:1-18)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him, nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . Out of his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

This is the gospel—the Good News—of our Lord!

Christmas has come, and most of the world thinks it's already gone, but today we celebrate the 2nd Sunday of Christmas. **In Latin America and some European churches, the Twelve Days of Christmas are an annual reality.** The birth of Jesus in the stable is only the beginning. The *big* day is the arrival of the Three Kings on January 6th, Epiphany.

Epiphany means revelation. For Christians, it means the revelation of Christ to the world, as marked by the arrival of the Three Kings. Look at that story from Matthew, chapter 2:

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea during the time when Herod was king. When Jesus was born, some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the baby who was born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled. He called together the leading priests and teachers of the law and asked them where the Christ would be born. They answered, "In the town of Bethlehem. . . ." Then Herod had a secret meeting with the wise men and learned from them the exact time they first saw the star. He sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, "Look carefully for the child. When you find him, come tell me so I can worship him too."

After the wise men heard the king, they left. The star they had seen in the east went before them until it stopped above the place where the child was. When the wise men saw the star, they were filled with joy. They came to the house where the child was and saw him with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their gifts and gave him treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But God warned the wise men in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they returned to their own country by a different way.

Our gospels contain three stories about the beginning of Jesus' earthly life—and what a difference there is between Matthew, Luke, and John! You couldn't do a children's Christmas program from John: No star or wise men, which we find only in Matthew. There's no baby in a manger, no angels or shepherds—those are from Luke. There's nothing wrong with those familiar Christmas stories. But Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, is much more than that!

In the Prologue to his gospel, verses 1-18, John is trying to prepare us to meet the Son of God. Not just *meet* him, but truly get to know him, up close and personal, in-depth and in-your-face. The Jesus we meet in John's gospel has an earth-shaking agenda:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may not *perish*, but may have eternal life. Indeed, he did not send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him.” *This* is truly the gospel of the Lord!

But what does it all mean? Now, 2000 years later, in a world that would seem a nightmare of chaos to people of Jesus day, what relevance do the three Christmas stories have? Let's examine *how* they were told, *why* they were told, and *what difference* the birth of God makes in our lives today.

First, *how the message was delivered*. In Matthew and Luke, the messengers were *heavenly*: a bright and shining star in Matthew, and a single angel followed by a whole host of heaven in Luke. This is *God's* story, and God is both the author and the main character. God wrote the script and planned the delivery **“before the foundations of the world”**—words from today's Ephesians text. In all things, God took the initiative and followed through.

Second, *why* did those heavenly messengers go to those two groups of people in particular? Luke tells of shepherds, and Matthew, of wise men. Most of us grew up with nativity sets and manger scenes, so it's natural to associate the shepherders and magi with Jesus and Christianity. But in both of these stories, the news of the divine birth was given to *outsiders*.

Shepherds were social outcasts, men usually of poor character who couldn't get along with *normal* people. Why on earth would the angel chorus stoop so low? But at least the shepherds were *Jews*.

However, the magi, the wise men—they weren't even of God's chosen people! They were astrologers—*star gazers!*—from somewhere in Arabia. God used their interest in the heavens to guide them to Jerusalem, where their ignorance of Jewish scripture was revealed. They had to ask where Messiah was to be born. Once again, total outsiders. . . .

My final question is the most important: *What difference does it make to us today that God was born under those precise circumstances two millennia ago? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* And the Word became flesh and lived among us, **"full of grace and truth."**

The *infant holy, infant lowly*, laid in a stable, worshiped by outcast shepherds and pagan wise men—that vulnerable baby was God-in-the-flesh. It's a holy mystery that this *Word who became flesh and lived among us* existed as and worked with God from the beginning of time.

But the real wonder we celebrate at Christmas, and forevermore, is that the Word *continues to dwell among us*. Here's where the gospel of John helps us make connections.

"In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, came into the world. . . full of grace and truth."

- God gave birth to that life in the creation billions of years ago, and in the birth of each one of us individually.
- Jesus, born in a stable and sitting at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, was and *is* the light, not only for Christians, but for *all people*.
- The light of Christ—the light that *is* Christ—shines in the darkness, and all the evil and wickedness and sin and brokenness of the eons has not been able to overcome that light, which enlightens *everyone*, not just those who claim a certain knowledge of or relationship with God.
- And the Word became flesh and lived—and *lives*—among us: in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints; in the scriptures and the song; in the waters of new birth; in the bread and wine.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Thanks be to God!