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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
First Sunday after Christmas, Year C
December 26, 2021
Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147
Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7
John 1:1-18

Four Christmas Gospels

In the beginning was the Word. So begins the Prologue to John's gospel, our gospel today.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

Most often in English the Greek *logos* is translated, "Word." But we can substitute any divine attribute. Doing so can make John's prologue more deeply resonant if it has become so familiar we don't really hear it anymore. We can hear it afresh in this way.

In the beginning was the Christ, and the Christ was with God and the Christ was God.

In the beginning was Wisdom, and Wisdom was with God and Wisdom was God.

In the beginning was Love, and Love was with God and Love was God.

In the beginning was Compassion, and Compassion was with God and Compassion was God.

This gospel, the prologue to the gospel of John, is the fourth of the gospel texts for Christmas.

Centuries ago, in the same kind of four-gospel cycle of readings we now have again, people coming to church on Christmas heard different gospels depending on what time of day they attended service.

Traditionally, those coming to mass at sundown on December 24, Christmas Eve, would hear the genealogy of Jesus from Matthew's gospel. This is the first gospel of Christmas, this long genealogy from Abraham to Jesus, tracing his lineage through Joseph's line, an all-male genealogy that stops five times along the way to inject the names of five women in sexually ambiguous circumstances whose lives and contributions turned stories of calamity into narratives of deliverance. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary are all progenitors of Jesus through whose audacious behavior in the midst of adverse circumstances divine power was made manifest. This is the first gospel of Christmas: calamity is turned into deliverance.

The second gospel of Christmas is Luke's story of angels and shepherds. Basically, as I said Christmas Eve, heavenly messengers come to brigands and thugs in the field, to outcasts doing work that only outcasts did, to people on the margins working the midnight shift under a wide starry sky. This is the story we hear in the middle of the night as our ancestors did, as December 24 becomes December 25. It's the one we heard at our 11:00 PM service on Christmas Eve. In the darkest part of the night, we receive a message that grace is born anew. This is the second gospel of Christmas: those on the margins are at the center of the divine story.

The third gospel of Christmas is the one heard by people at service at dawn on December 25, Christmas Day, the third day past the winter solstice when you can first perceive an increase in light. It is Luke's story of the visit to the manger by the shepherds; it represents moving from hearing to knowing, from report to experience. This is the third gospel of Christmas: this story is our story; we can live the truth of it.

The fourth gospel of Christmas is the one traditionally heard on Christmas Day in the full light of day, after the sun is well up. It is the prologue of John's gospel, the gospel we have today. It is beautiful, powerful, poetic. Essentially, John's prologue is a call to remember the two incarnations of the divine, first in the cosmos and then in Jesus the Christ. As author and scholar Alexander John Shaia puts it, "Spirit and matter have always been together; we separated them, but they have been together since the beginning. The birth of Jesus the Christ is the revelation of what has been throughout the whole time, from the beginning."

God has been singing this song all along, has been sending this message of connection through the powerful interconnection of the cosmos, the music of the spheres. We have mostly missed it, but the messages have been there all along. We don't have to live in a binary world. We don't have to keep splitting things and people off from one another. There is room for all of life and all of us. Integration is greater than opposition. This is the fourth gospel of Christmas: integration, wholeness, is possible.

Four Christmas gospels. Four crucial and connected yet distinctive messages.

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We have mostly missed it, but the messages have been there all along. The divine life seeks to be born in us and to live through us. The Incarnation includes us. And it is our task, our joy, our privilege, our challenge to allow Christ's life to live in us. Not just to live a Christlike life of Christian virtues but to live the particular life given to us with purpose, as Jesus the Christ lived his own life on this earth.

I think sometimes we confuse living the life of Christ with living a respectable life, a responsible life. What if we reconnected with the idea that the life of Christ is an adventurous life, a life of purpose and service?

I'm not saying that it would be easy. As e. e. cummings put it, "it takes courage to grow up and become who you really are".

I'm not saying that it would be easy. I'm saying that it would be good.

It's only day two of the twelve days of Christmas. As we move through this celebration of the birth of our Savior, can you give yourself time to think about Incarnation, about birth and death, about life and purpose and service?

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As I said also Christmas Eve, Christmas points not backward to a day in the past but to today and tomorrow and all the days in which matter and spirit are together, joined, capable of possibility, of purpose, of service, of love.

We need all four gospels of Christmas. We need to hear all four messages. Adverse circumstances give birth to things we could never imagine, demonstrating that calamity is turned into deliverance. In the deepest dark is where new radiance is born. The angels declare this to the shepherds, revealing that those on the margins are at the center of the story. The shepherds go to see for themselves, revealing that this story is our story; we can live the truth of it and find grace born anew in the darkness. And lastly, we need John's full-light-of-day prologue. We need to hear again that integration, wholeness, is possible, and that God has been singing this song since the beginning.

God has always been coming into the world, has always loved the world, and in the story of Jesus the Christ we come to understand this in a new way.

Baby Jesus doesn't stay a baby, and neither can we. We are invited into the divine life and the adventure of the incarnation. We are called to grow up and become who we really are. Not just for these twelve days of Christmas but for all the days of our lives.