

Sermon Christmas III and The Holy Name. January 1, 2023
Isaiah 52:7-10 Psalm 8 Philippians 2:5-11

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John 1:1-14

Some say that the Bible could be called 'Salvation History' and perhaps it is. But that sounds a little too much like a textbook to me, and at my age, I just feel like I've read enough textbooks for one lifetime. It might not surprise you to know that for me the Bible is more like a game of Jeopardy, in which I phrase all of my responses in the form of questions and hope to be the last correct questioner, so that I can choose the next category and the next square to be revealed. You know, 'Bible characters for 40' and our host, St. John, reveals the frame 'He was the light coming into the world'. And I respond 'Who was John the Baptist', and the nasty audible buzzer tells me I was wrong, that I should have asked a different question instead. Living with the Bible means, to me, sorting the questions I have, with the Spirit's help, into the most faithful progression for my pilgrimage. When I need to ford a turbulent stream, the stepping-stones I seek are questions leading me from one to the next, rather than pat and irrefutable opinions masquerading as answers. That's why I love this reading from the beginning of John's Gospel; it provokes so many questions! It's often called 'the Prologue' to the Gospel of John, for it sets out the whole premise of the Good News (the Best News?) in such a rich and graceful and provocative way.

As a Christmas reading, John's prologue certainly isn't a nativity scene. It wouldn't be very adaptable for a Christmas pageant or an elaborate display in someone's front yard (at least not without some amazing special effects!). It is, rather, a description of the mysterious Incarnation of God's saving wisdom and grace, the timeless stepping into real time, the manifestation of the spiritual in physical format, love that one can apprehend with human sensory capacities, light which is somehow both wave and particle. Gale and I love watching mystery stories and trying to solve the puzzling script before the answer is revealed (she always beats me to it BTW...I think she may have a retirement future as a screenwriter!) But this mystery which John describes, this abiding mystery of the Incarnation, is not a story, nativity or otherwise. It is, I think, an expression of God's foundational nature, a nature which despite all the best clues, we will never be able to fully comprehend. There is the light and the darkness, for example. This is clearly a metaphorical clue, but it only provokes more questions, more consideration, more thinking about the treasure of the Incarnation. The light came into the world and the darkness cannot overcome it. Is that an actual, visible beam of light? Is it enlightenment? Is it a metaphor for spiritual energy? And what about the darkness? Can the light actually be victorious over the darkness and eliminate it, or is the light just a temporary safeguard against the powers of the darkness? I'll take Bible metaphors for 100...Oh, a Daily Double!

And the Prologue causes me to wonder: isn't God's wisdom always creating? Not just at the beginning, whenever that was, but continually creating things and opportunities, and people who have free will and are strong-willed and willful and who gather themselves into communities and societies and make their own good and bad decisions? God creates a beautiful thing! And, really, what could go wrong? I ask. Does St. John also mean that God's wisdom has a failsafe nature? A companion to God's creative intentions? Does that companion become activated when the judgmental smoke alarm goes off because of something done or left undone? Does it turn on the light and rush in with love to rescue and redeem? John seems to say it does, and that it has been there all along, waiting for the right time when its mercy is most needed. And what if God were able to specifically identify that nature, give it a sacred nick-name, a Holy Name, so that we might see it more clearly, be aware of its existence, recognize it as a special gift, and so that (as Isaiah said) all the ends of the earth shall see the Salvation of our God.

Knowing who Jesus is, or at least thinking I do, I am provoked to ask another question: If Jesus is like a son to God, as John says, isn't he also an heir to the responsibility God assumes as creator? Sure, as an expression of God's wisdom, not only with God, but indeed also coeternal God as well, Jesus is Savior and Redeemer, but

shouldn't he be a teacher, too? With the threat of darkness and bad decisions all around, shouldn't Jesus also be teaching a 'preparedness class'? Can he please help guide our questioning, help us concentrate on pursuing and trying out faithful options? I'm not asking for pat answers, necessarily...a few Socratic parables would be very nice. And teaching me to pray would be helpful, too. And establishing a new covenant with me, and sharing his determined attitude, his patience and his insight, and his Body and Blood. Would that be asking too much? Would that be too much of a sacrifice? John's Prologue suggests that God's wisdom, incarnated for a season in Christ Jesus, is mysteriously all of this and more. And then I am provoked to ask, when reading St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, if I am somehow worthy to bow my knee to him, speak his Holy Name with my lips, and with my tongue witness to his love.

There are many stories floating out there on the internet which are meant to be instructive metaphors for the Incarnation of Jesus, and some of them are quite good. Now, you know, metaphors have a limited usefulness, and they're never able to catch the full meaning of the mysterious events they are trying to represent, but they do offer some Aha moments and raise some questions which help us appreciate some deeper meanings. And these stories typically have one thing in common...and I'll tell you what it is in a moment. But first, let me share my latest metaphoric idea about this morning's topic: My sister Melissa lives in Buffalo.. I don't know why...I've been trying to talk her out of it for 40 years now with no success. She loves the place, is mesmerized by it. Anyway, you know that there was a brutal storm there last week, she says it's the worst one since the first year she moved there in 1977. The mighty winds blew in over Lake Erie, raising the water level at the East end of that lake and driving blinding snow and airborne ice all across the shoreline, until a thick glaze of ice covered Buffalo's waterfront. It was, from Melissa's report, a hellish scene.

Sadly, the waterfront birds, the sea gulls, the vermin we're advised not to feed or encourage, were all disoriented by the advancing storm, blown to the ground, and frozen alive in that vast sheet of ice. I don't know if birds experience fright, but they were certainly overcome by this disaster, by winds through which they could not navigate and a blizzard through which they could not see, and then became imprisoned by the vicious weather. Something like when we, metaphorically, become imprisoned by the unexpected, or even by those things we have done or left undone. As the storm settled down, dozens of these resilient birds were still alive but trapped. And Melissa texted me some videos: In them we could see a small team of volunteers who felt called to come to the waterfront and save the gulls. They spoke encouragingly to the birds as they used tools to cautiously chip away at the ice casings, slowly exposing the heads, then the wings, and finally the feet of each bird they found. The rescued heads would look fearfully around and make a few tentative squawks, the uncovered wings would reach desperately for the sky, and when the feet were at last free, each gull would launch itself into freedom to live another day.

So, what this story has in common with other modern metaphors for salvation, whether from personal experiences or even the evening news, is that the rescuers are kindhearted and ministering humans. In this case, they have felt called to brave the cold and messy storm aftermath to respond to the question "what's a faithful thing to do now?" They were called, I think, to be God's salvic agents, to be the hearts and hands of Jesus, themselves anointed spiritually to do what he would do. We like to assert that Christ is Incarnate in the Church, that we are the Body of Christ, and I hope and pray we aren't being too presumptive when we do. But if we are to bear the banner of the Holy Name of Jesus, wear his cross around our necks, and in all ways presume to identify with his mission and ministry, then we should seek out opportunities to live the questions and Aha moments of our own metaphors. May his light illumine our paths, and may he be pleased to live on through us. Amen