

**The First Sunday after Christmas**  
**Year C – Revised Common Lectionary**  
**December 27, 2009**  
**St. James' Episcopal Church, Pullman, WA**

*John 1:1-18; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7*

Once again our headlines remind us of the world into which the angels declare peace on earth, the world which is crying out so desperately for a savior. A young man from Nigeria, educated in Oxford, is thwarted in his attempt to set fire to a Northwest Airlines plane bound for Detroit. In Iran, the occasion of Ashura, the solemn season of mourning for the Imam Hussein, has ignited fatal riots and protests against the government. While in Iraq, the same religious season has prompted heightened security as Shia worshippers are targeted by Sunni car-bombers, and Christians are tamping down their own festal celebration to avoid giving offense. And in Gaza a year has gone by since the Israeli bombing campaign unleashed on the civilian population trapped by blockades and hemmed in by their own blood-thirsty leaders.

A world where peace is overturned and trampled by the people whose God calls them to reconciliation. A world where sacred scripture can be used as a vehicle for the indoctrination of hate, of permission to target the innocent, of a call to a permanent state of war.

The apostle Paul confronted a world where adherents to scriptures were undermining his proclamation of a new way, of the good news of Christ's reconciling work of salvation for us all. After his initial mission in Asia Minor, in the communities in Galatia that would have included his own home town of Tarsus, rival preachers came through to proclaim that there could be no reconciling with the God of Israel without first becoming a part of the covenant people of Israel. Without first becoming subject to the law, and very specifically undergoing circumcision. Whether Paul's rivals were themselves followers of Jesus, or perhaps Jewish proselytizers is not really clear. We have little information to help us other than Paul's own polemic. But what we do have is his promise of how we are to read the sacred texts that disclose the God who calls us home through Jesus.

The ordinances of holy scripture had a purpose, they formed a covenant people, they gave shape to a culture that could travel the earth and still proclaim the saving acts of God. But with Jesus, the need to become a Jewish convert in order to be connected to God had been wiped away. It is Jesus who frees us from the strictures of the ancient law and gives us immediate adoption into the family. Through Jesus we are taught to call God, Abba, Papa. Jesus is our new ordinance.

Paul's take on scripture is at once liberating, and in an unintended consequence, the source of centuries of anti-Semitism. What was to be a liberating access to spreading the good news became, through that same rigidity of reading texts, a wall of separation between Jew and Christian, until some 500 or so years later, in a perversion of Paul's intent, the church decreed that a Jew wishing to become a Christian would have to first renounce Judaism in order to become adopted into the family of God.

Another holy text that fired our anti-semitic past is the Gospel of John. John's Gospel is challenging because of the unyielding statements about who is good and who is evil; who is a child of darkness, who of light. The community that produced John's Gospel had been excluded from the Jewish synagogue; the in-fighting is evident in the language of the text as the Jews are identified as the ones who are the enemies of the Good news. There is no way to whitewash that hostility. One way that preachers and pastors deal with it is to refuse to read a gospel that underwrites such evil.

The way I have chosen is to read and re-read that gospel, taking my challenge with me when I read it, asking as I pray over it for a way into the truth that it proclaims for us. Asking if there is good news for me and you and for the world. I think that the prologue to John's Gospel is the best place for us to find that good news – good news that transcends the limitations of John's own in-house language; good news that speaks to us today in this season of Christmas; good news that we can share with our neighbors, across the street and around the world.

In the beginning. Before time. Before creation. Word. Word formulated in the heart and mind of God. Word uttered by God. Word that is apart from and with God; distinct from and one with God. Word that is God.

Mystical language that recalls the imagery of Lady Wisdom, companion of God in the creation of the World, dancing with God in delight at the dawn of time. Language that recalls the prophetic song of Isaiah, – as rain and snow fall from the sky and bring forth fruit, so does my word go forth from my mouth, it does not return to me empty.

Mystical language that we have been returning to every year at this time for millenia – just when we have celebrated the birth of the infant in the stable at Bethlehem, just when we're getting ready to hear of astrologers wandering into the scene from far off places, today we are returned to creation. The starry night over the hills of Bethlehem that burst forth in angelic glory for the shepherds to hear is now a blip on the cosmic map of the universe. We are in the dance of creation that the scientists at the CERN lab in Geneva hope to have a glimpse of this year in the Large Hadron Collider; we are in the dance of matter and dark materials that is tantalizing in its unknowability even as a pocket of dark matter has been found lurking underground in a coal mine.

John's good news begins before time, where darkness and light engage, where God's most intimate companion in that cosmic dance, the Word, has come at last and put on flesh. Has pitched his tent in our midst. Has come among us so that we could all see exactly what God looks like, from his vantage point as the precious child of God, bearing God's DNA and that of us humans, carried close to the breast of God, the father/mother of all being nursing the word at the heavenly bosom from before time.

From the vastness of all that is, from the inexhaustibility of created experience, of human possibility, there is this singularity, this moment in time, when God, in love with us, gives us a face, a shape, a voice, a man walking by the shores of the Jordan River, the Lamb of God.

And in that Gospel, the one that beginning Greek students love because there are so few vocabulary words to learn, even as they struggle to figure out what it all means, there is another one who nestles close to the bosom of Jesus. The beloved disciple. Not an only child, but loved enough to find that special spot in the lap of Jesus. So that as we begin our approach to that cosmic light, we reach out to the very human beloved disciple, the one who founded the community that produced this gospel, the one who brought Jesus' mother home with him, the one who has the stories to tell that give us the face of Jesus, and in turn the face of God. And in that community founded by the disciple that Jesus loved is a new commandment to sum up and include all the Law that has ever gone before – love one another.

A Gospel that was written to draw us closer and closer to God, to show us the pathway to eternal life and light and truth, often trips over its local arguments and its earth-bound failure to be as all-encompassing as the God it discloses. But for today, we have this moment, this inbreaking of the cosmic light.

The meaning of this birth, the meaning of this season, is not just the return of light we so eagerly await

each year at this time. It is the meaning of creation itself, that our salvation, our drawing near to God, is there from before there was ever a big bang. Before the Higgs Boson, before the dance of the quarks, before the eons and galaxies, there was the Word, that was always coming into the world to bring us into that eternal light and life with God.

Now that's what I call a celebration.