

Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas Day

December 29, 2019

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Isaiah 61:10–62:3; Psalm 147:13–21; Galatians 3:23–25, 4:4–7; John 1:1–18

I wrote in the newsletter for this week that I was surprised to learn that, in 1965, religion was already being excluded from television programming. So when Charles Schultz was invited to write *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, he chose to write it in such a way that no one could cut out the scene where Charlie asks, “Isn’t there anyone who understands what Christmas is all about?” and Linus responds by reciting from memory Luke’s story of the angels visiting the shepherds and announcing to them Jesus’ birth. Then Linus says to Charlie, “That’s what Christmas is all about.” CBS did not like the show with its religious content, but they had made a commitment to its sponsor, Coca-Cola. Coke got it right.¹

Of course, the New Testament gives us two stories for the birth of Jesus, the story of Luke, with the manger, shepherds, and angels,² and the story of Matthew, with the dreams of Joseph, the star, the visit of the magi—

¹ Lee Mendelson with Bill Melendez, *A Charlie Brown Christmas: The Making of a Tradition* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 15–17, 27.

² Luke 2:1–20.

magicians, astrologers—from the east, and Herod with his priests, scribes, soldiers, and the flight of the holy family to Egypt.³ Different stories with a common theme: a child conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of the house and lineage of David is the Son of God.

In the Christian East the beginning of John is the gospel for Easter Day—and the beginning of their Church year. In the first millennium of the Christian West, the Church year began on Christmas Day with this gospel—how Advent got the jump on Christmas and its gospel about the beginning is unclear.⁴

Not so many years ago, one needed a free advance ticket for the main service on Christmas Day at the Washington National Cathedral. Nowadays the only service there that requires an advance free ticket is the 12:00 PM Christmas Pageant on Christmas Eve—no comment, just fact.⁵

³ Matthew 1:18–23.

⁴ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 97.

⁵ https://cathedral.org/calendar/?filter_event_type=all&filter_start_date=2019-12-24&filter_view=week, (accessed 24 December 2019).

Lots of Episcopal parishes no longer have a Christmas Day service. I wonder whether that trend was already underway in the 1970s when the lectionary editors of the present Prayer Book decided to repeat the Christmas Day gospel on the Sunday after Christmas Day. The evangelist we call John also answers the question: Who is Jesus Christ? The Word made flesh, in verse 14, is one answer to the question. But John's proclamation is richer than that. Here are three different ways to translate the very first verse.

We heard from the Revised Standard Version—and the earlier King James Version and the more New Revised Standard Version are the same—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

In Raymond Brown's 1966 commentary on John, we read, “In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God.”⁶ In a more recent commentary, Francis Moloney, gives us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was turned toward God, and what God was the Word also was.”⁷

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), I:3.

⁷ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 33.

Why the variations: with God, in God’s presence, turned toward God? A Greek preposition is the reason. Brown wrote, “We attempt here . . . a rendering that will capture the ambiguity of the [Greek].”⁸ Moloney explained it this way: in New Testament Greek, the preposition used by John carries a sense of motion, movement.⁹ If you will, the Word is not just accompanying the Father, not just passive. These scholars’ translations try to help us get at the breadth of meaning that has come down to us about God and God’s work among us, in the past and in the now.

Another scholar’s commentary, that of Charles Kingsley Barrett, was also of the “in the presence of God” group. Barrett wrote this about the first verse of the fourth gospel, “John intends that the whole gospel shall be read in light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God.”¹⁰

Sometimes I wish that one story unique to Mark had been known to John, the story of the father of an epileptic son. The father is not sure that he has the faith Jesus wants him to have. When Jesus says to him, “ ‘All

⁸ Brown, 4–5.

⁹ Moloney, 35.

¹⁰ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955, 8th Impression, 1970), 130.

things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ ”¹¹ John’s Jesus asks only one thing of the people he encounters, the people he helps, “Do you believe in the Son of man?”¹²

Scholars generally agree that John’s gospel, at a very early stage, got an appendix, which we call chapter 21.¹³ It’s the story of Jesus appearing to some of his disciples who have gone fishing in the early morning. It includes a dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter about the unnamed disciple known only as the disciple Jesus loved. There is no known ancient reference to a text of John that doesn’t contain it. Yet, the text of John logically ends with these words to Thomas, who, finally, has proclaimed his belief in the Risen Jesus when he sees the Risen Jesus and his wounds. The evangelist writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”¹⁴

¹¹ Mark 9:23–24.

¹² For example, John 9:35.

¹³ Brown, 1077–80.

¹⁴ John 20:29–31.

I know for some belief will always be hard. I know that some will never believe. But as much as I would like evil people to be punished for the cruelty and heartache they inflict on others, John's Jesus proclaims a larger vision. In the end, there will be one flock, one shepherd, one God of all, world without end.¹⁵

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁵ John 10:16.