

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Jacobson
Christmas Day, Solemn Mass
25 December 2021
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Isaiah 52:7–10
Psalm 98:1–6
Hebrews 1:1–12
John 1:1–14

Last night, we heard the story of Jesus' birth from Luke. The Holy Family is in Bethlehem. Jesus is swaddled and placed in a manger because there was no room in the inn. The scene is intimate and familiar. It is something we can see and describe and even make a crèche out of to commemorate.

But today, we turn our attention to John. John, who is sometimes depicted symbolically as an eagle, gives us the chance to soar high above and take in the big picture implications of our Lord's birth. It isn't a scene that's easy to picture or describe.

John starts his work with "in the beginning," using the same Greek words in the first verse of the Greek version of Genesis used by the early Church.¹ "In the beginning," which is of course followed by, "God created the heavens and the earth."²

Our minds are meant to go right to the opening of Genesis and creation when we hear John's opening chapter. That is his intention. Though, in John, we hear that "in the beginning was the Word."³ And the Word, the Son, was with God and was God. "All things were made through him."⁴ The Son, who exists out of time, was central to creation.

I'm reminded of medieval iconography, which often depicts Christ as the central figure in creation. This was before Michelangelo painted that old bearded man on the Sistine Chapel ceiling reaching out his finger to Adam. Before that, Christ was often how God was portrayed in creation scenes.

¹ ἐν ἀρχῇ.

² Genesis 1:1.

³ John 1:1.

⁴ John 1:3.

As Christ is the perfect image of God, it makes sense that medieval artists, for example, would show Jesus interacting with Adam and Eve. Or, on a more cosmic level, Jesus might be shown manipulating the stars and the planets or on top of the world as the divine architect.

But, as St. Gregory the Theologian pointed out in the fourth century, today's feast that we're celebrating isn't exactly about creation. Gregory along with Basil the Great and John Chrysostom are referred to as the Three Holy Hierarchs in Eastern Orthodoxy, important saints and theologians of the early Church. Gregory says that what we are celebrating today, the Nativity of our Lord, isn't about creation, but rather about re-creation.⁵

In this re-creation, where "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,"⁶ God is still acting as creator. But, this is also something different. This is about how that which was creating before time, and exists beyond time, has now entered into time as part of the creative process.

The light that shines in the darkness; the light that was there when "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep"⁷; the light that persists and won't be deterred by the evil in this world. "The true light that enlightens [us]."⁸

God, who is boundless and beyond comprehension, becomes something we can visualize and even represent with a small statue of a child in our crèche. God takes on flesh and transforms it -- and in doing so, transforms creation. This is what Gregory means by "re-creation."

At a certain point in his discourse, as he's getting really deep into the theological weeds, Gregory pauses and acknowledges that some of his listeners may be starting to ask, well "what has all this to do with us?"⁹ It's a fair question.

Thinking about what all this has to do with us, I'm struck by the importance John often places on receiving Jesus.¹⁰

⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 38.4.

⁶ John 1:14.

⁷ Genesis 1:2.

⁸ John 1:9.

⁹ Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 38.10.

¹⁰ Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John*, Vol. 4 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 44.

In our Gospel passage he writes that “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”¹¹ Later in John, Jesus will say to his followers that those “who receive any one whom I send receives me; and [those] who receive me receives him who sent me.”¹² That is, the Father.

The Son “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,”¹³ as our epistle reading put it, but here in John, Jesus is calling upon us to play somewhat of an analogous role.

We’re to receive Christ and be changed by it. Be re-created. We’re to be changed to the point that those who receive us, receive the Son. It can’t be exactly the same, but it certainly does mirror how those that receive the Son, receive the Father.

It may sound radical. It may sound a bit crazy. But, this is our calling. This is how John is telling us that God is to be made known to the world.¹⁴ Of course, this re-creation through Christ connects back to Genesis, when God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”¹⁵ The intent was always there.

At the end of Mass today, the altar party will process to the crèche for the conclusion of the liturgy. We can’t all crowd into the chapel these days as we normally would on Christmas Day, but the crèche will be up for a while. There will be plenty of time for all to visit throughout Christmastide.

Over these days, as I gaze upon the Christ child, an icon of God, I’m going to try to focus on how I can better be a reflection of Jesus. But, also, and more importantly, I’m going to remind myself to continue to receive others and try to see Jesus in them. Let them help me to be re-created in God’s image.

St. Gregory summarizes Christ’s birth and the purpose of re-creation this way: it is “the coming of God to Man...that we might go back to God.”¹⁶

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

¹¹ John 1:12.

¹² John 13:20.

¹³ Hebrews 1:3.

¹⁴ Moloney, *Sacra Pagina*, 380-381.

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26.

¹⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 38.4.