

Church of the Holy Apostles (Episcopal-Roman Catholic), Virginia Beach, Virginia
Christmas Day (RC Year B)
December 25, 2011

The Rev. Michael B. Ferguson, Episcopal Co-pastor
Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

If Christmas morning Mass is not on your regular schedule – and in traditions like ours that make a “big deal” of the Christmas Eve Mass it may not be – these lessons may startle you a bit. I will admit that I tend to think of Luke’s version when I think of Christmas. Somehow the announcement of a census that caused Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to travel to Bethlehem, their new baby being born in a place where we expect to see farm animals, and the momentous announcement to some scraggly shepherds presents a homier picture for us than John’s poetry. We have listened to Luke’s version so long that most of can recite it, or at least paraphrase it accurately.

But John’s announcement, also momentous, but in a very different way, because there are no angels, is a good bookend to our understanding of why we were here celebrating last night and why we are here again this morning. Luke’s story allows us to pigeonhole this event in a way that can allow us to lose sight of the importance of the Incarnation; of the Word, John’s term for God, becoming part of our world. A tiny baby is defenseless, totally dependent on adults – hopefully loving parents – for food, clothing, shelter, protection, and formation. Because we know, or know about, babies we can say, “OK, here’s what the baby needs, and eventually he or she will grow up.”

Luke’s version of the birth narrative can be fixed in a relatively calculable way. Although historians question whether or not Caesar Augustus’ census actually occurred as Luke describes it, the world, strongly influenced by the Church, has settled on a date that seems to satisfy the need for accurate accounting. The year of Jesus’ birth

became known as “year Zero” on the Christian calendar, so here we are two thousand ten or eleven years later, depending on how hung up you are on mathematical purity.

John’s telling, however, is very different. John goes all the way back to before the beginning of time as we know it. John asserts that Jesus, whom John names here as the *Logos*, or the Word, was present with God at the instant of creation. When God created the world out of nothingness, God’s Son was right there in the midst of things. Not even standing to one side while God brought order out of chaos, with God’s Holy Spirit standing on the other side, but standing in God’s shoes, so to speak, as God works a wondrous miracle God takes, we assume, some ethereal dust and turns it into the created world that we know.

So, John’s story doesn’t have any baby that we can see, or that needs to have its diaper changed, or needs to nurse at his mother’s breast. On one hand, we might think that John’s story doesn’t show us a human Jesus, and that’s certainly true if we use Luke’s version as the standard for identifying Jesus’ humanity. But John, and only John, tells us something about the person of Jesus that is totally unique, and John asserts just how human Jesus really is. Tucked away in the midst of John’s poetry concerning darkness and light and the fact that John the Baptizer announced Jesus’ coming, and the painful assertion that Jesus’ people, the Jews didn’t recognize or accept him, is a nearly throw-away line.

Here’s that sentence, which allows this story to be the necessary companion to Luke’s birth narrative: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” There in many ways is the deepest meaning of the Incarnation. Said as simply as I can, which still

doesn't do the elegant simplicity of God's action, here it is: God became human in the person of Jesus. God came to live with us. Through Jesus, we see who God is and how God's story is our story, because God became one of us. And we learn how we are dependent on God's grace for all that we are and all that we have.

There is one more word in that significant sentence that is essential to our understanding of the Incarnation. The meaning of the Greek word that is translated into English as "lives" – or "dwells" in some older translations – is that the One who is living or dwelling among us actually "pitches" a tent in our midst. There is hardly any more intimate way of living with another person than to camp out in a tent. Tossing and turning and snoring disturb the other person. In order to get into and out of your sleeping bag you have to figure out how both persons are going to accomplish that important task, And deciding how and when to get dressed and undressed also takes close communication with the other person in the tent.

Ancient scripture tells us that God camped out and moved with our Jewish ancestors as they traveled from their captivity and slavery in Egypt to reach the Promised Land. Although those ancestors didn't have any of Eddie Bauer's first line tents, movable shelter was a must in the deserts of the Middle East, and still is. According to John, Jesus who is also God pitched his tent in the midst of those Chosen People many centuries later, so that God could see firsthand what God's children were up to and what they needed. By the same token, God's tent is pitched here, in the midst of this special community, and in the midst of every community where God is worshiped and where God's story is told, and where God's love is shared.

Not only is God's tent pitched where God's people worship, God's tent is pitched

at your home, where you work, where you shop, and where you meet people who need to know who God is, even if they don't recognize it right now. God's tent is pitched among the 171 families and 29 individuals this community helped feed last Thursday as the Food Bank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore brought its big truck into our parking lot to spread some very tangible Christmas cheer. Although the workers and the persons receiving food couldn't see it, God's tent was pitched in our parking lot.

This idea of God's pitching a tent among us has an additional aspect that is worth recalling on this Christmas of 2011. In many ways this has been a difficult year for many people. Hundreds of thousands of Americans remain out of work and will not have many, or any, real gifts to share today. Earthquakes in Japan and New Zealand, among other places have caused much human suffering and property damage. Violence perpetrated by God's children against other children of God has taken and continues to take hundreds and thousands of lives. Thousands of military personnel of many countries will be away from home today, pitching their tents on barren and frozen hillsides, or on ships at sea facing cold winter storms and isolation, or at air bases on alert awaiting the call to respond to the next crisis God's children perpetrate.

But because God came into our world as a human baby over 2000 years ago, pitched his tent among us, and has remained with us and accessible to us, whether we are Christian or not, for those 2000 years, there is hope and love and support for those who need it this day. Because the Word – God – came to the whole world. And if part of the world chooses not to accept God, as God allows, we have chosen to accept God and so we are called to work, with God, to make this world a place where God's love is proclaimed and known and shared, one action, one life at a time.