

Second Sunday of Christmas

Author's Note: Today's Gospel is that "other" version of the Christmas story with which so many people are unfamiliar: the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Unlike the homely and down-to-earth accounts of the Nativity that are in Luke and Matthew, John quotes an early Christian hymn that portrays the wonder of the Nativity in the language of philosophical and theological abstraction. To "put some flesh" on these abstractions, I am going to "cross" the Johannine text with some of Martin Luther's concrete and down-to-earth reflections on the familiar Lucan account of the Nativity as they have been translated by Roland Bainton in his widely admired *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Fortress Press, 1948). Emphasis in the Bainton quotes is mine.

God in the Flesh

John 1:1-18

Second Sunday of Christmas

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to

testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And 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. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.



Talk about “putting some flesh” on love! Because of that first incarnation and first Christmas, because of that once-and-for-all, utterly unique event that happened 2000 years ago, we have been forgiven all our callous blunders, all of the times we have turned away the Christ Child at our doorstep.

DIAGNOSIS: Lost in the Darkness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Looking for Light

The majestic prologue opens the Gospel of John by setting it in the context of some of the most fundamental questions of human existence. Ever since the creation of the cosmos in Genesis 1, there has been a struggle between darkness and light, between the forces of chaos and death and the forces of light and life.

Humanity is always in search of the light that will lead it through the dark chaos of life. Human history is littered with the rubble of such failed attempts. John's opening prologue declares that with the Word becoming flesh in Christ, it will be different. This is the beginning of the end of that struggle. The question is whether humanity will see the light or once again descend into the darkness.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Looking in the Wrong Places

One would think that such a cosmic event would not go unnoticed. But it did! Again, the world failed to know him. His own people would not accept him (1:10-11). Luther expands Luke's account of the failure of Bethlehem to recognize the holy family. Their failure is a reflection of all of humanity's failure to recognize what God was doing when "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14).

"Now when they were to come to Bethlehem, the Evangelist says that they were of all, the lowest and most despised. Bethlehem ought to have made way for them but they were shoved into a stable to make common lodging and table with the cattle while many cutthroats lounged like lords in the inn. They did not recognize what God was doing in the stable. With all their eating, drinking and finery, God left them empty, and this comfort and treasure was hidden from them. Oh, what a dark night it was in Bethlehem that this light should have been seen. Thus God shows that he has no regard for what the world is and has and does. And the world shows that it does not know or consider what God is and has and does" (Bainton, pp. 37-38).


Such failure is the result of unfaith. The world is consumed with its eating, drinking, and finery and does not trust the God who comes like this. Therefore, God has no regard for the world.

Luther's old adage is once again on display: Glaubst du, hast du. The god you believe in is the God you have. Not a pretty picture!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Lost in the Darkness

Life without the Word is life without the light. Look at Genesis 1. Before God started creating, there was only the darkness, a primordial muck in which nothing lived or thrived. When the Word is not recognized, trusted, and believed, that is the world to which we have returned: the primordial world of darkness, chaos, and death. Luther's vivid language only begins to portray the plight of those who have rejected the light.

"Joseph had to do his best, and it may well be that he asked some maid to fetch water or something else, but we do not read that anyone came to help. They heard that a young wife was lying in a cow stall and no one gave heed! Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone, for even though Mary had been a beggar and unwed, anybody at such time should have been glad to give her a hand" (Bainton, p. 30).



“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.” John 1:14

PROGNOSIS: Found by the Light

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Word Became Flesh

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5)

As Luther said in his sermon, God could have rightfully set fire and brimstone upon us all. But he doesn't! God didn't send fire and brimstone on Bethlehem . . . and he doesn't send it upon us. Instead, God sends the baby, the word in the flesh, the light shining in the darkness. The child was born into the midst of a world that has no time for anyone or anything but itself. This child grows and bears all that is wretched with this world. This child bears the fire and brimstone that we deserve to the cross and suffers the consequences . . . for us, . . . so that we and all the Bethlehems of this world might be forgiven.

Could God have been any more concrete and down-to-earth than that? Talk about “putting some flesh” on love! Because of that first incarnation and first Christmas, because of that once-and-for-all, utterly unique event that happened 2000 years ago, we have been forgiven all our callous blunders, all of the times we have turned away the Christ Child at our doorstep.

“Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look upon the Baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him, That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm” (Bainton, pp. 39-40).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Seeing God

Because this light shines in the darkness, we now can see. Formerly alone and blind in the darkness, we see that now we are the sons and daughters of God. With the eyes of faith, we can “see” God for who God truly is: the God of light and love who comes again and again among us, then as a Babe . . . but now in bread and wine, in the flesh and blood of this community, in words of forgiveness and in water splashed on our bodies at the font.

“Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother, still a virgin.... Look at the child, knowing nothing. Yet all that is belongs to him, that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in him. Doubt nothing. Watch him springing in the lap of the maiden. Laugh with him. Look upon this Lord of Peace and your spirit will be at peace. See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Babe with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a

babe. Are you affrighted? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the Child in whom is salvation. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother" (Bainton, p. 40).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): God in the Neighbor

Because we have finally seen God in the Babe, the Word made flesh, we also see God in others, in those strangers, neighbors and even enemies . . . who show up at our door . . . maybe not looking for a night's lodging . . . but for a kind word or a helping hand.

"There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves, 'If only I would have been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!' Yes you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time, you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need, you do to the Lord Christ himself" (Bainton, p. 38).