



Liturgical Day: The Nativity of Our Lord / Christmas Day

Date: December 25, 2008

Sermon Title: The Word Became Flesh and Live Among Us

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There is a story told of an old monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order. Things looked grim.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had developed an intuitive sense of what was taking place in their neighborhood, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot on one of those occasions to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no-one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. They talked for a short while and then the time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic – something strange – was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the Father Abbot? He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas.

Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets so grumpy at times. But, come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 52:7-10

PSALM

PSALM 98

SECOND LESSON

HEBREWS 1:1-4 [5-12]

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 1:1-14

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
GAVE US YOUR ONLY SON
TO TAKE ON OUR HUMAN
NATURE AND TO ILLUMINE
THE WORLD WITH YOUR
LIGHT. BY YOUR GRACE
ADOPT US AS YOUR
CHILDREN AND ENLIGHTEN
US WITH YOUR SPIRIT,
THROUGH YOUR ONLY
SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR
REDEEMER AND LORD, WHO
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU
AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE
GOD, NOW AND FOREVER.
AMEN.**

9300 E. BELLEVUE AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

WWW.STPLC.ORG



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

peoples' sides, when you look back on it, Eldred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Eldred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just so ordinary. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be the Messiah, could I?

As they each spent time with their thoughts, the old monks began to treat one another with extraordinary love and respect on the off chance that one among them might be Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary love and respect.

Because the forest surrounding this old monastery was very beautiful, it just so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander among some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated buildings and meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary love and respect that now began to surround the five monks, and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it.

Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. Its beauty drew them in. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant centre of faith and light and hope.ⁱ

In this morning's Gospel lesson, the opening words of St. John's Gospel account, we learn that the Word of God, the source of all that exists, the very power of creation, became flesh and lived among us as Jesus of Nazareth. We gather here in the quiet of this Christmas morning to honor his birth among us, and give thanks for the grace and love of God that we know in Jesus Christ.

But today's gathering is not just the acknowledgement of an event that took place many years ago in history. It is an opportunity for us to give thanks to God that Jesus, the Word of God, continues to become flesh among us today. We Christians hold to an "incarnational" theology. That is a technical term for our belief that when God comes to us, it is often through a person. We believe that about Jesus, for certain. Some traditions call the celebration of his birth, "The Feast of the Incarnation." We believe Jesus to be the very presence of God in human form.

But in a certain way, we believe that about simple human beings as well. Through the best and worst of us, our God chooses to move, and be present to those who are in need. Through the kindness we offer to one another, through the good news we share with one another, through the simple willingness to be present in times of difficulty – in these and many other ways, God's presence is known through the love and care that is extended through those who believe, and who make themselves available to serve as agents of love and hope.

Today we give thanks for the birth of Christ among us some 2,000 years ago. We also give thanks that his presence is known whenever one of his followers reaches out with love and respect. May we be touched by God's hand through the love we receive from one another, and may the Christ who was born in Bethlehem be born anew every day in our hearts and in our homes.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 27, 2008)

ⁱ Source unknown

Gospel Lesson (English Text) ⁱⁱ

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ 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. ⁱⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

¹ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ν. ὁ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο νθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν να μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα νθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ διοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ λαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ νομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. ¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/worship/church_year.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 1:1-14, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. John 1:1-14, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).