

“Telling the Good News” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
December 27, 2009 – Christmas 1C

Every year through the season of Advent and right up through Christmas Eve we hear narratives filled with interesting characters from some combination of Matthew, Mark and Luke. For the last five weeks we’ve been hearing stories about John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the angels, shepherds, emperors and kings. And those stories have contained a lot of details like the times and places that these things surrounding Jesus’ birth took place, “When Augustus was Emperor and Quirinius was governor” we heard Luke tell us on Christmas Eve. We heard that Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in the hill country outside of Nazareth and that Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem to be registered. Throughout Advent up to Christmas Eve we get real people and a plot to follow and a basic narrative structure to help hold it all together. Right up through Christmas Eve, we get a story.

And those stories have definite startings and endings to them: Matthew begins with Jesus’ lineage, laying out the generations before Him. Luke moves it up a bit and jumps in a mere few months before Jesus’ birth and the gospel of Mark, begins even later than that, at the point at which Jesus is already an adult who is being baptized at the river Jordan. And each of those gospels ends with resurrection. Either appearances or empty tombs with disciples and the women running off in various directions filled with joy or fear or confusion or all of the above. Matthew, Mark and Luke carry us from a certain time and place to another certain time and place through the course of Jesus birth and life and death and resurrection.

But this morning we get a whole different sort of proclamation. We get John. And all of a sudden here we are with beautiful poetry, hymnody but very little story with which to work. There are hardly any characters involved and the time frame is completely different: having just gathered a few days ago at the manger, now suddenly, John takes us all the way back to the beginning, the very beginning in the very opening line of his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Simply by shifting gospels we move from first century Bethlehem to before time with the setting being the entire cosmos.

So it’s safe to say that this gospel is a little different. And part of what that shows us is that putting words on the presence and meaning and reality of the Christ takes many different shapes and comes in many different forms. There’s no one definitive way to do this. By writing in a different style with a slightly different perspective John reminds us of the challenge of communicating the good news of Jesus and the impossibility of one approach capturing it all. How do you begin to introduce the idea let alone the reality of the Son of God? How can you possibly explain incarnation? In a mere 30 pages or so how can you convincingly talk about – his birth, his childhood and adolescence, baptism, his calling of disciples, the miracles he performed, the people he invited to the table, the authorities he faced, the meals, his trial and death and resurrection?

John decided that in order to share what he knew of Christ he needed to use narrative but also poetry and theology and a touch of hymnody too. He added personal interpretation, put it all in the language of his particular community of faith and topped it off with a big prayer at the end of his gospel that it would in it’s own unique way offer the good news of Christ to the world.

And so while we celebrate Christmas and the miracle and gift of incarnation we need to ask ourselves how it is that we tell the story that is the good news of Christ's presence in our lives, in the world, beyond the world. And while there is a collective answer to that question – offer our proclamation every Sunday as community gather – there is also an individual response: each of us carries our own combination approach – we use a little narrative, throw in a bit of history, probably add a little poetry and song and toss it all together with theological interpretation using the language of our own community of faith and the other areas that touch our life. And that's how it's been all along. The church is communities of people searching out ways to tell the good news of Christ in order that they and others might believe, or be healed or welcomed or fed.

John reminds us that this gift we celebrate in Christ is the Word who is ultimately beyond words. Unable to be captured by any one style of telling. Beyond narrative and poetry and theological articulation. Beyond any one denomination or belief system. He's God's Word not ours.

But it is our job, it is our privilege to keep telling the story and singing the hymns and writing new hymns and telling new stories and telling our stories and offering up some of our experience or poems or the challenges we face or the healings we've known. And part of the miracle of incarnation is that God will be in some of those words too. The words we find in order to offer the world the good news that is the Christ, Immanuel, God with us.