

The WORD Lives Among Us
Sunday, December 27, 2009
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Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Galatians 3:23-25;4:4-7
John 1:1-18
Psalms 147 or 147:13-21

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christmas should be a season of great joy, and for most of us it is. But it is also a time of great stress, and for many people it is not a joyful time at all. Shopping—especially in bad weather and at the last minute—can be pretty stressful, and when finances are tight we may worry about how we’re going to pay for everything. And, meanwhile, our merchants may worry that they won’t be able to sell enough stuff to stay in business for another year.

Of course, there’s always the stress of travel. All too often now days, we’re separated by many miles from our loved ones. If we can’t see them over the holidays, we may feel sad because we miss them. Whether we travel to visit our friends and relatives or they travel to visit us, crowded airports and lost luggage are always big concerns. And bad weather—a big winter storm for example can ruin our plans for even short-distance travel.

For many of us this is a sad season because it brings back memories of happier Christmas times with loved ones who are now too ill to be with us, or have already died. It’s very hard to celebrate when we are grieving. We may even feel guilty or even a little angry because we can’t really enjoy the season, and the people around us seem to be having a good time. Maybe what causes so much stress at Christmas time is that we tend to put too much emphasis on the peripheral things and forget what Christmas is really supposed to be about.

But of course, for most of us, Christmas time brings many good memories too. I fondly remember that when I was small, on Christmas Eve, our family would always go to the pageant at our Church. Sometimes, I had a part in it. I can remember being a shepherd, but I never did get promoted to the rank of wise man or Joseph. And I usually had to be content with singing in the children’s choir.

After the pageant, we always went over to my Uncle Charlie and Aunt Edith’s house to celebrate Christmas. Their five children, Grandpa Blaylock, Uncle Cal and Aunt Ella would all be there too. We’d wait until everyone was gathered, and after what seemed to be an eternity to us kids, Santa Claus would come—white beard, red suit and everything. Grandpa always seemed to have disappeared when Santa came. I guess it was a good thing because then Santa could sit in Grandpa’s chair. There were presents for everyone—not just kids—adults too. And after Santa Claus left Auntie would bring out lots of goodies like homemade candy and popcorn balls. It was a happy time for everyone.

I can’t remember most of the Christmas presents I got. Only a few stand out in my mind. Sometimes I got what I wanted, and sometimes I didn’t. But there is a saying that you should be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it. Some gifts are thrilling at first, but the thrill doesn’t last. Other gifts continue to delight us for a long time.

When I was about 8 or 9 years old, what I really wanted most for Christmas was an electric train. We lived only a half block from the railroad station, and I thought that the steam trains that came through then were the greatest thing in the world. The Sears and Roebuck catalogue always had a nice selection of trains with pictures of kids having a wonderful time playing with them. Why, some of those trains even puffed real smoke and chugged, and some had a whistle just like the real trains on the Missouri Pacific. I wanted a train set for Christmas more than anything, and I made no secret of it.

But two or three Christmases went by, and I didn't get the train. At first it was because World War II was going on, and although the model trains were pictured in the catalog, there was printing on the picture that said "sorry, not available". Even after the war was over, train sets were expensive, and money was tight, so I had to do without.

Then finally, one Christmas, I hit the jackpot! When I opened my presents, there it was--a train set! I was delighted. It was a nice Marx freight train, and I thought I surely couldn't have gotten anything better. The funny thing is that within a few weeks, I wasn't enjoying the train anymore. We didn't have any space in our house to set it up permanently, so I had to put track together each time I wanted to play with it, and then I had to take it apart again and put it away when I was finished. The speed was hard to control, and the engine kept jumping the track. Cars would come unhitched and had to be hooked up again. Besides, the track would only make a circle, an oval, or a figure eight; so even when it worked perfectly, about all I could do with the train was to watch it go around and around. I finally got sick and tired of the train, and I didn't care about playing with it anymore. And then I felt guilty and embarrassed because I had begged so hard for it and I knew my parents couldn't really afford it. So, I got exactly what I thought that I wanted, but I found out that I really didn't want it. A lot of things in life are like that. The anticipation is often a lot better than the reality. Toy trains don't really go anywhere.

At other times, I got Christmas presents that I really enjoyed for a very long time—a bicycle, a set of Tinker Toys, and a Daisy Red Ryder BB gun. I played with those things for years. Much later in life, my wife gave me a Pentax SLR camera for Christmas, and I took hundreds of great pictures with it. But what I remember much more than the presents are the people who gave me those present and the love that prompted them. Some gifts never wear out their welcome; they just keep on giving.

Today, St. John's Gospel tells us about the greatest Christmas present of all. At the time Jesus was born, the Jewish people were waiting and hoping for a new king. After hundreds of years of foreign domination, they read the words of the Old Testament Prophets and prayed that God would raise up a new king for them like David or Solomon--a king that would drive out their oppressors and restore their nation. Even though this seemed impossible, devout Jews still clung to their hope. Of course, what actually happened was much more amazing than the coming of any earthly king would have been. God doesn't always do things exactly the way we expect Him to do them. They were hoping for one kind of miracle, but God brought about something far better.

As St. John's Gospel says, "the Word became flesh and lived among us." Now when John referred to Jesus as "The Word", what did he mean? Actually, John used a term that was familiar to the educated people of his own time and place but it may seem strange to most of us today.

The Gospel was written in Greek, and John actually called Jesus the "logos". In our Bible, "logos" is translated into English as "the Word". Unfortunately, there really isn't an English term which is a satisfactory translation of "logos". "The Word" still isn't really adequate for describing what John meant. There probably isn't any adequate way to describe what John was trying to say, so he was only doing the best he could to communicate with the people of his own time.

In stoic philosophy, the "logos" is the principle of active reason that pervades and animates the universe. So by calling Jesus the Logos, John was trying to say that Jesus is the agent through which God creates the universe, brings life into it, and communicates with it. That's what the Logos is, and that's what Jesus is.

Thus, when John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," he was telling us that Jesus existed as the Word even before creation. And everything is created and made alive through his action. God creates by the Word. For example, God says, "Let there be light," and there is light. God acts through the Word and the Word carries out God's will.

In the birth of Jesus, God did something that nobody could have expected. The Word became flesh—he was born a human being—the son of a poor woman. He could feel heat and cold, sorrow and joy, pleasure and

pain. He could laugh and cry, feel pity and anger. In short, he was a fully human being but also God at the same time.

In his life on earth, Jesus taught us and healed us. Then he suffered and died for us. And through his death and resurrection he redeemed the world. Who would have ever thought that God would do something like that for us? This very Word of God became human and knows all about suffering and being one of us. He did that for us because God loves what he has made. If that isn't love, I don't know what love is.

So Jesus Christ is much greater than any earthly king—much more than just the king of one people at one time. He is the king of the universe for eternity. He is the greatest gift of all—the gift that lasts forever. “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” And that's why we celebrate this season in remembrance of his Incarnation—his becoming one of us so we could be with him. So, no matter how frustrated and stressed we may feel in this season, the most important thing to remember is that we never need to be separated from the love of Christ—the greatest gift of all.

Amen.

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