

## Christmas 2016

Our word from Holy Scripture this Christmas morning comes from the Gospel of John. These verses are from the prologue to his Gospel, but they are so much more than a simple forward or set of opening credits. This passage of scripture is the key that unlocks the meaning and primary story lines of the entire story as told by Saint John. In these verses we hear that Jesus is the very incarnation of God's creative Word, the embodiment of God's love and light, the physical presence of God on earth who brings us a message of grace and truth.

But we also hear in these verses the foreshadowing that the darkness of the world fails to understand the light and in fact, closes its collective eyes to resist the light. Jesus will come to his own, but some of those who should have been the first to recognize and accept him were the ones who would reject him.

Even at Christmas as we celebrate the innocent baby Jesus, the shadow of his cross already looms menacingly over the manger.

John says of Jesus, in the central verse of this prologue to his Gospel: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Again the mystery and miracle of Christmas, no matter which Gospel reading one uses, is that in Christ God had come to be with us, among us, in the midst of our ordinary and sinful world. But John uses a word picture drawn from the pages of the Old Testament. The phrases he uses for "dwells among us" in this verse literally means: God pitches his tent among us.

Notice that John does not say that Jesus was the holy invisible God masquerading in the flesh of a human, or slipping into a costume of skin just for appearance sake. No, in Jesus God became flesh. God actually

came all the way to us, to dwell with us, accepting the limitations and weaknesses of our mortal existence, risking and facing the very resistance and opposition he knew would come, as darkness attempted to snuff out His light.

In Jesus Christ, God both spoke and acted out in front of us the divine will.

Let's put it another way: Imagine if you looked out of your window at the winter cold outside, and saw a cute little family of squirrels searching in the snow for winter food. By now all the acorns of October have already been found and stored away by other animals and now the bitter cold and hunger of December is crushing the life out of this little furry family. So what do you do? You could try to bring food for the squirrels, but every time you step outside to feed them, the squirrels flee in terror, being more afraid of you than they are afraid of their hunger. You could try to just set the food out for the squirrels, but whenever you do that, other animals always seem to get to the food before the squirrels.

If only you could communicate to the squirrels! If only you could let them know that you love them, want only to save them from the harsh world in which they are suffering and that your fondest wish is to show them the way to the gift of life and abundance you want to give them! If only you could speak "squirrel," if only you could go out among them in such a way that they were not scared or alarmed by you!

And then it dawns on you that is exactly what God did by becoming our flesh, dwelling among us, coming in Jesus Christ not only to speak the word, but to be the Word. He came outside during our winter, to give us the gift we could not find on our own and even brought us the possibility of eternal life.

And for this gift, we owe much to Mary. The moment when Mary said her “yes” to the angel, there is a turning point in the history of the world. It is the moment of Incarnation, when the Word became flesh and began to live among us as one of us. The world would never be the same. In a way, Mary’s “yes” is a more important moment in salvation history than Jesus’ actual birth, but it is understandable that we should tend to celebrate the more visible presence of God in Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem.

Mary had yet to learn what that “yes” involved but it was made unconditionally and it was never withdrawn. Through Mary a life of trials and tribulations, of which we can know surely only a fraction, right up to those terrible moments as she stood beneath the Cross and saw her only Son die in agony and shame as a public criminal, know that she never once withdrew that “yes.”

There is a clear message there for us. We too have been called in our own special way to give birth to Jesus in our lives and in our environment. We too have been called to say “yes,” an unconditional “yes” to following Jesus in good times and in bad. I recall when a woman I knew always had a crucifix over her bed, but when it became obvious that she was about to die, she replaced the crucifix with pictures of her grand-children. Sad to say, her “yes” to God was withdrawn when things didn’t go her way.

Now is the time for us to renew that pledge with Mary’s help and example. It is our challenge to be “yes” people today and for the rest of our lives.

Now back to John’s gospel, we know that John’s account of the holy birth does not begin in Nazareth with an angel’s announcement of a virgin named Mary, betrothed to a man named Joseph.

Rather, it begins in eternity.

It begins before time.

It begins in a mystery without a beginning or end.

It begins in the mystery when we dare to name the Son of the Father, Jesus.

Our scriptures begin with the story of God's choice to go out of himself, to relate beyond himself, to transcend himself.

God spoke, the scriptures tell us, and there was a starry explosion of creative love.

Think about it: if we split an atom, is there not an explosion?

By analogy, if the eternal God speaks, if God, as it were splits himself open, should we expect anything less than a "big bang"

Returning for a final time to John's gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...yet the world which was made through him knew him not. He came to his own home and his own people received him not.

The Son of God not only took our flesh, but took our flesh when and where it is most weak and most powerless; He took our flesh as a newly born infant.

The Word became flesh and became an outcast; he become one with all of us and became most intimately one with all who have been, are, or will be cast out:

With those cast out of their mother's womb,

With those cast out of their parent's love,

With those cast out by infidelity of their spouses,

With those cast out by the lack of their children's love and concern,

With those cast out because of a disability or illness they suffer,  
With those cast out because of who they are,  
With those cast out because of whom they love,  
With those cast out for what they believe,  
With those cast out of their native countries due to the violence,  
With those cast out from countries who could offer them safety and hope,  
With those cast out by tyranny,  
With those cast out by violence,  
With those cast out by hatred,  
With those cast out because they are not well heeled, well born, well-bred or well educated.

And so Christmas is the Feast of all outcasts, those whom the gospel refers to as the poor, those marginalized in a world that values power, and money and status.

Christmas is a feast of hope for all who sit in darkness; it is a light that for a light shines in the darkness, a darkness which will never be able to overpower the light of Christ.

It is this understanding of the birth of Jesus that allows us all the opportunity to utter our unconditional love of God, a love that our “yes” keeps us from departing from God and that allows us to have a truly MERRY CHRISTMAS.