



“In a Word”

Meditation preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

Sunday, January 2, 2011

Scripture – John 1: 1-5, 10-14

Christians tend to blend the four gospels all together; yet each gospel presents the story of Jesus the Christ in a unique way. Every Christmas we focus on Matthew and Luke because they are the ones which begin with Jesus’ birth – and though their stories differ, we happily combine and merge them. Mark presents the pithiest gospel, beginning his good news with the baptism of Jesus by John and ending with the women running in terror and amazement from the empty tomb. And then there is John, who starts his good news not with Jesus’ baptism, nor with his birth, but with the birth of the world. He writes, “In the beginning...” hearkening back to the very first words of scripture. John re-tells the story of creation. In Genesis, we remember how God created by speaking the world in to being, “Let there be light, let the earth put forth vegetation...” and so on.

John recasts the creation story in his prologue, and in so doing proclaims the ultimate mystery of God through a beautiful hymn. Instead of “In the beginning God” John records “In the beginning the Word...” The Word, the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God. Essentially John has written a poem, which serves as a super saturated solution of theological truth. He employs a powerful metaphor to convey the meaning of Jesus the Christ.

This coming Thursday is Epiphany, the day we celebrate God’s manifestation of the Christ child to the magi through the sign of the star; therefore, it seems fitting for us to reflect on how God makes Christ manifest among us.

According to John, Christ was with God at the beginning. Christ was an integral part of creation. As God spoke creation into being, Christ was in the speaking. Christ the Word was with God before time began. The transcendent beauty and lofty theology in John’s Prologue may seem too immense for us to comprehend, but that is, after all, the point of this text: that the transcendent, beyond-words God took on flesh, came to us, found us, sought us out, took on our own existence, with its pains, its sorrows, its vulnerability and its joys.¹ It is through this Word Incarnate, Emmanuel, that we have received, and do receive, grace upon grace.

Through the course of Advent we lit candles remembering the gifts our Christ brings: hope, peace, love and joy. And then at Christmas we marvel and celebrate the incomprehensible gift of Emmanuel, Godwithus. I suspect if we could use only one word to describe God, this word would undoubtedly be Love, and thus we refer to Jesus the Christ as Love Incarnate. But Divine Love spoken in Christ is not something we can pocket or hold on to as an insurance

policy or personal talisman. No, this Love is dynamic, active, and creative, always coming to us in rich, new and various ways depending on our need and circumstance.

In addition to hope, peace, love and joy, John affirms that the Word brings us Light and Life – Light which overcomes every darkness, and Life that never ends. What has the Word brought to your life this year? Perhaps God has whispered the Word in your heart as **patience** as you have struggled with a job search, or **forgiveness** as you have sought to cleanse yourself of resentment. Maybe the Word has echoed within you as **strength**, as you have fought an addiction.

As a pastor, I have the tremendous privilege of witnessing the Word dwelling, or pitching a tent in people's lives – I perceive the Word in the **devotion** of a husband feeding his disabled wife, in the **forbearance** of a mother with her rude and rebellious teen, in the **gentleness** of a child with his new little sister, in the **kindness** of a stranger in the checkout line at Barnes and Noble. The Word abides in us and speaks through us – in the **generosity** of a single mother who prepares dinner for our homeless guests in Family Promise, in the **caring presence** of a Stephen Minister who listens to someone battling cancer, in the **compassion** of a member who drives an elderly person to the doctor.

What Word are you yearning to hear from God today? What Word is God striving to speak in and through you? Sometimes the Word we need is also the Word God seeks to speak through us.

In preparing for funerals, I cherish spending time with family members of the deceased. As they reflect on their loved one's life, I often get to know the person more fully through the shared remembrances. Frequently, after spending an hour with the family or close friends of the deceased, a word or several words will surface as signposts of the person's life. This occurred this week as I prepared for the funeral of Sarah, a 16 year old who spent her entire life dealing with severe health problems. Sarah was an intelligent, quick-witted, assertive young woman who loved animals and travel and reading. But the words which surfaced over and over again regarding this young woman – who faced not bumps in the road, but daily mountains to climb – were these: **courage, strength, faith and wisdom**. These words convey what Sarah needed most in life to deal with her infirmity, and this is how the Divine Word dwelt in Sarah and spoke through her life – as **courage, strength, faith and wisdom**.

Twice a year Westminster sponsors a series on grief. The class is called "Living with Loss" and meets 11 Sunday evenings to offer education and support. People enter the group in the throes of grief – suffering shock, loneliness, regret, and heartache; and desperately hungering for **hope** and **comfort**. Through the weekly meetings, confidential sharing, personal journaling, reading and prayer, participants find support and guidance through their wilderness of grief. Instead of being healed and restored, they are companioned and transformed. At the end of the sessions, participants realize that their grief will always be a part of them, but it will become a gradual scar instead of an open wound. Moreover, group members inevitably discover that they now possess a deep sensitivity for anyone suffering loss, and that they feel led to offer sympathy and hope to those paralyzed by grief. The very things these group members had come seeking – **comfort and hope** – are the gifts they want to share by the end of the course. I believe this occurs because the Word Incarnate is at work within them.

Instead of making a new year's resolution, perhaps we should pause, reflect, and listen for the Word which seeks to be born in us, the Word through which God continues not only to create, but to heal, comfort, convict, convert, teach, and inspire.

The Word by which God is forever coming into the world speaking light and life. Maybe you will hear that Word in daily prayer, or in a yoga session while resting in savasana. You may find the Word coming to mind as you serve pancakes at Saturday Morning Breakfast or install windows in a Habitat House. Perhaps that Word will be uttered to you through a friend or colleague, or strike a chord in the Epiphany star you pick up from the basket today.

As Westminster begins its 125th anniversary year, may we also listen for the Word God seeks to live and breathe through our congregation. Is it hospitality? Generosity? Justice? Service? Community? May we always be alert to the reality of Emmanuel – Godwithus – GodwithALLpeople. For the Word was made flesh, taking on our humanity, blessing our ordinary lives, and thus whispering grace upon grace into daily rituals and routines.

Listen. Listen for the Word
as you write your Christmas thank-you notes,
as you prepare soup for Code Purple,
as you chop onions for dinner, or change the baby's diaper,
as you walk the dog or wait for the bus,
as you share a meal with family or friends.

This morning Christ bids us to be still and know God's presence now, as we receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation with neighbors who, like us, are straining their ears and tuning their hearts to hear God's Word within.

¹ Kate Huey "Epiphany Celebration" www.ucc.org