

### **“Christmas Continued”**

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

It’s as much a part of the Parker family’s Christmas tradition as singing Christmas carols around the tree, opening presents, and sitting down to a wonderful Christmas feast. As the family gathering is coming to an end, Uncle Paul looks around the room and announces, “Well, I guess another Christmas has come and gone.” But this year, his traditional announcement was met with an unexpected objection; his niece Jessie, known for her outgoing and outspoken personality, looked her uncle straight in the eye and stated, “No it’s not! We’ve still got a lot more Christmas to celebrate!”

Jessie was right; Christmas doesn’t end at the end of the day on December 25. There are indeed “twelve days of Christmas” that begin on the day we celebrate the birth of our Saviour and end on the day of Epiphany, January 6, when we celebrate the arrival of the Magi to pay homage to the newborn king. But even that doesn’t seem to be enough; indeed, of all the seasons of the church year, Christmas is the shortest. There are four weeks of Advent; some six weeks of Lent; seven Sunday of Easter; and several months of the season after Pentecost. Christmas gets less than two weeks; in the words of Ferlin Husky, many of us *“wish it could be Christmas all year long.”*

I’m not advocating that we keep our Christmas decorations up all year long, nor would I want to hear Christmas carols in July (although places like Bronner’s in Frankenmuth, Michigan manage to do this very well); but while we will be packing away our ornaments, lights, and nativity scenes in a few weeks, the good news that we celebrate in this season is something that we truly celebrate throughout the year. That’s why this morning we hear the words of the Fourth Gospel, which set the coming of Christ in a larger context. You won’t find any aspects of the familiar Christmas story in John; there’s no manger, no angels or shepherds, no mention of stars or Magi or Bethlehem or even Mary and Joseph. John begins his gospel much earlier than the first Christmas; his first three words are the same words that are found on the first page of the Bible: *“In the beginning ...”* The Fourth Evangelist begins the Gospel with the cosmic pre-existence of the Word (*logos*), the means through which God created the heavens and the earth (*“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”* – Genesis 1:3). John focuses on the Word’s relationship to the world rather than on the stories of Jesus’ birth or with the proclamation of John the Baptist; his Prologue has more in common with the cadences of early Christian hymns than with the prose of the narratives in the Synoptic Gospels:

- “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” – Philippians 2:9-11.
- “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.” – Colossians 1:19-20.

The role of the Word in creation and in human history draws on the Word of God in the Old Testament. The creation accounts in Genesis are governed by God’s spoken word; God spoke through the Law at Sinai and through the prophets: *“The Word encompasses both word and deed, and that fits well with the image of logos in the Prologue... The Fourth Evangelist reshapes the wisdom tradition to reflect the historical reality of the incarnation.”* (Gail O’Day).

In the use of *logos*, John has chosen a term familiar to both Jews and Greeks but has used it in a new context with fresh meanings, using it as the lens through which he views the coming of Jesus into the world. The Fourth Gospel's central claim is that when one sees Jesus, one sees God; when one hears Jesus, one hears God:

- "The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf." – 5:36-37a.
- "Then they said to him, 'Where is your father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'" – 8:19.
- "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves." – 14:10-11.

*"The oneness of the Word and God means that the revelation spoken and enacted by the Word is indeed the revelation of God."* (O'Day).

By affirming that *"what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people"* (1:4), John moves from the role of the Word in the one moment of creation to the ongoing, life-giving character of the Word. This ability to give and sustain life is symbolized by the "light," a common image throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'" – 8:12.
- "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." – 9:5.
- "Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.'" – 11:9.

The continuing presence of the Word that is life and light means that *"the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."* (1:5). The light "shines" in the present tense, but the activity of the "darkness" is narrated in the past tense. In this verse there is both a declaration of a state of fact – light is stronger than darkness – as well as a promise that *"the light continues to shine and the darkness has neither overcome nor understood it."* (David Lose).

- "The fact that the Word creates means that creation is an act of revelation. All creation bears the stamp of God's Word. That which had especially come to be in God's creative Word was the gift of eternal life. There was an attempt by darkness to overcome the light (the Fall), but the darkness 'did not overcome it' (aorist, a single past action). But the light shines on, for although man sinned, a ray of hope was given to him." – Raymond Brown.

While John's Gospel contains no angelic pronouncement of the birth of Jesus as *"good news of great joy for all the people"* (Luke 2:10), his proclamation of the good news of the abiding presence of the Word comes in his statement that *"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."* (1:14). At the heart of the incarnation for John is the reality that the glory of God is revealed as the Word moves decisively from the eternal to the temporal; *"it is in Jesus' sheer humanity that he is the Revealer"* (Rudolf Bultmann). The Revealer, Jesus, is no a mere man but is the Word of God made flesh, become human. The Word who dwelt with God now dwells with us, human being like himself. The "glory" (*doxa*) of God is visible in the humanity of the incarnate Word, the historical Jesus.

- "With the words 'the Word became flesh and lived among us,' the community recognized the bond that had been established between them and God as revealed in Jesus. God did not stay distant from

them, remote and isolated; rather, in Jesus, God chose to live with humanity in the midst of human weakness, confusion, and pain. This bond holds for the contemporary Christian community as well. To become flesh is to know joy, pain, suffering, and loss. It is to love, grieve, and someday to die. The incarnation binds Jesus to the 'everydayness' of human experience. When the believing community confesses along with the Fourth Evangelist that the Word 'lived among us,' it affirms the link between the incarnation and its own humanness." – O'Day.

John's Gospel proclaims to us that Christmas is more than a twelve-day season in which we remember the birth of Jesus centuries ago in a manger in Bethlehem. While our focus in this holy season is on the "little town of Bethlehem" in which "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight," the message of Christmas continues long after the calendar season has ended, long after our lights go dim and our decorations are packed away. The message of Christmas is that the child born of Mary is the eternal Word of God that dwells among us, our confident hope that this holy child of Bethlehem is the fulfillment of the prophetic promise of *Emmanuel* – "God is with us." The message of Christmas is that the light of Christ shines in all seasons, and that no darkness we may face in the present or future can extinguish it; for *"we live confident of the promise that light is stronger than darkness, love stronger than hate, and life stronger than death."* (Lose). The message of Christmastime is a timeless message for us to *"put away our sorrow, a time for joy, for happiness and song – how I wish it could be Christmas all year long."* (Ferlin Husky).

- "It was Christ's will and pleasure to be born as a man so that in him we might be born again. 'In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we might become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.' (James 1:18). In this way Christ takes our birth away from us and immerses it in his own birth, giving us his birth, that we may be made new and clean, as if it were our own birth. Therefore shall every Christian rejoice in this birth of Christ, and glory in it, as if they too were born of Mary." – Martin Luther, Christmas Day 1522.

The Parker family's next Christmas gathering featured all the familiar traditions that the family had enjoyed every year – with one notable exception: when the family gathered in the living room after the carols were sung, the present opened, and the dinner consumed, Uncle Paul did not announce that another Christmas had come to an end. The words of Jessie would become the family Christmas tradition: "Christmas is just beginning!"

*Christmas is just beginning.* Howard Thurman's poem "The Work of Christmas" is a fitting accompaniment to the message of John's Gospel that the light that first shone at Christmas continues to shine in the presence of God's abiding Word made flesh in Jesus Christ:

- "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the stay in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart."

Yes, the season of Christmas will soon come to an end, but the message and mission of Christmas continue: to *"go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere ... that Jesus Christ is born!"*  
Amen.