

## **“The 365 Days of Christmas”**

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

Frankenmuth, Michigan has been a favourite destination for Americans and Canadians for generations (and hopefully will again be a place where Canadians will be able to visit again soon). Known as “Michigan’s Little Bavaria,” it gives visitors a taste of German culture and cuisine without having to fly across the ocean. No sooner had we arrived in Stratford than people encouraging us to visit Frankenmuth, especially after they discovered that both Susan and I have German heritage in our family histories. When we finally visited Frankenmuth, we discovered that it was everything people had told us and more: we loved the Bavarian character of the town, the many shops, the music playing throughout the community, and, of course, the chicken dinners at Zehnder’s. But the highlight of our trip to Michigan was the most unique store I have every visited: Bronner’s Christmas Wonderland. It is advertised as the world’s largest Christmas store, and while there is no way to prove this, I cannot think of any store that could top the sheer size and volume of Christmas items than Bronner’s. We had been warned that it would take several hours to navigate the store, so we devoted a day winding our way through the many aisles of the most varied collection of Christmas items I have ever seen, to the point where it was almost overwhelming. Our visit to Bronner’s was certainly a highlight of our trip to Frankenmuth that we will always remember.

But while I enjoyed exploring and purchasing many Christmas items at Bronner’s, there was something strange about shopping for Christmas on a hot July day when I was wearing shorts and a summer shirt. I usually do not think about Christmas until at least November and have often associated Christmas shopping and decorating with colder weather (as we are experiencing this year). There was something strange about shopping for Christmas in the summer until I overheard someone in the store who was also struggling with doing their Christmas shopping when it did not feel like Christmas outside. When one person voiced their confusion about shopping for Christmas out of season, the other person remarked, “But it is Christmas 365 days a year, because Christmas is not about a season or the weather; it is about the birth of Jesus and the good news that Christ is with us always, in every season!”

I should have thanked that person and offered to buy them a Christmas ornament, because they gave me the perfect idea for a sermon as the Christmas season comes to a close. The liturgical calendar reminds us that the Twelve Days of Christmas is not merely a song that we sing during this holy season; it is the actual number of days of the season that begins on Christmas Day as we celebrate the good news proclaimed by the angels that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” (Luke 2:11). While we may not give our true love a partridge in a pear tree or six geese a-laying, it is a season when we celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord and the fulfillment of the promise of Isaiah that in the birth of Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that “*a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” (Isaiah 9:6). On this second Sunday of the Christmas season, we continue to rejoice in the good news that in the little town of Bethlehem “*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” (ELW 279). But as the twelve days of the Christmas season are drawing to a close as we celebrate the arrival of the Magi on the Day of Epiphany, January 6, we know it is time to start taking down our Christmas decorations and putting them in storage for another year (unless you are one of those households that keep your Christmas lights up year-round!). As the seasons of nature change, so do the seasons of the church year progress from the celebration of the birth of our Saviour to the season in which we contemplate what it means that in the arrival of Mary’s son is the fulfillment of the promise that he is *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” It is this good news that offers us the opportunity to consider what it means to celebrate Christmas not only on one day or even twelve days; what does it mean every day to remember the joyous news that calls on “*all creation [to] join in praising God the Father, Spirit, Son, evermore your voices raising to the eternal Three in One.*” (ELW Hymn 275)?

Today’s Gospel lesson invites us to consider what it means to remember and give thanks for the birth of Christ at Christmas in every season. Unlike Matthew and Luke, who provide us with the traditional stories of the birth of Jesus, the Gospel of John begins with an account of the cosmic pre-existence of Christ as his relationship to the world rather than the stories of Jesus’ birth or the proclamation of John the Baptist. The Prologue in the Fourth Gospel is concerned with two different spheres of God’s presence: the eternal sphere of the cosmic Word of God and the temporal sphere of John the Baptist, the world, and the incarnate Word; “*the Prologue is thus a summary of God’s dealings with the world before and in the incarnation of the Word, Jesus.*” (Curtis Martin and William Wright).

The Fourth Gospel begins not with the proclamation of the angel Gabriel concerning the birth of Jesus to Mary nor the angelic visitation to Joseph. Instead, it begins at the very dawn of creation with the same words that begin the creation story in Genesis: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1). The creation accounts in Genesis are governed by God’s spoken word: “*Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good ...*” (Genesis 1:3-4a). Throughout the Old Testament, God also spoke through the Torah at Mount Sinai and through the prophets:

- “Then God spoke all these words: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.’” – Exodus 20:1-3.
- “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” – Isaiah 1:2-3.

The use of “Word” (*logos*) at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel is significant, encompassing both word and deed. John draws on the rich symbolism associated with *logos* and uses it as the lens through which he views the coming of Jesus into the world, stressing the eternal existence of the Word with God, an existence outside the bounds of time and history. As the Prologue unfolds, the eternal Word will not stay outside time and history but will enter the time-bound world. John affirms that the Word is fully God as Paul affirms this confession of the early church in his letter to the Philippians:

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God 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 2:5-11.

The oneness of the Word and God means that the revelation spoken and enacted by the Word is indeed the revelation of God; “*when one sees Jesus, one sees God; when one hears Jesus, one hears God.*” (Gail O’Day). The message then shifts from the created order in general to what this means for human beings; by affirming that “*in*

*him was life*" (1:4), the Prologue 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: "... and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (1:4-5). As the divine Word is the agent by which God created everything ("... yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." – 1 Corinthians 8:6), the imagery of light appears throughout Scripture to refer to God's radiant splendour ("Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." – Psalm 119:105). The light "shines" in the present tense, but the ability of the darkness to overcome the light is narrated in the past tense. Darkness in the Fourth Gospel is a symbol for sin, the spiritual condition of alienation from God. This spiritual darkness can neither overpower the light nor understand the light and its ways. Jesus will later identify himself as this very light: "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*" (John 8:12).

- "In the newly created order, life and light are the ways in which the Word, God's self-expression, is effective, [evoking] the wonder of creation, the gift of life, the power of the Word, and celebrates the mystery of revelation that transcends conventional limits of time and space. The resilience of the light that shines in the darkness is confirmation of the power of life available in the Word." – O'Day.

In the Fourth Gospel, John is never identified as "the Baptist," nor is he ever called the forerunner of Jesus. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, there is no account of the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River. John has one function in this Gospel: "*He came to witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*" (1:7). John will later point to Jesus as "*the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*" (1:9):

- "The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.'" – 1:29-31.

While the world owes its very existence to the Word, the Evangelist reports that while "*he was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him*" (1:10-11). Yet in spite of this lack of recognition and even rejection of the one

who is the Incarnate Word of God and the eternal light that not darkness can overcome, the good news is that “*to all who received him who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God*” (1:12-13).

- “Here you learn what a great glory is accomplished by the Son of God in his coming among those who receive him, have faith in him, and believe him to be the one sent by God to help the world. This is to be the new work and a new way, that he will give the power and the right to become children of God to them who believe in his name.” – Martin Luther.

The Incarnation of the Eternal Word into the temporal sphere of humanity is proclaimed in the message 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). As the Revealer of God’s steadfast love for humanity, Jesus is not a mere human being, but the Word of God made flesh that has now become incarnate through the birth of the Christ child at Christmas. He is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary.*” (*Small Catechism*). The Word who dwelt with God now dwells with human beings; “lived among us” recalls God’s promise to dwell with God’s people in the Old Testament: “*My dwelling place will be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” (Ezekiel 37:27). “Dwelling” (*skenoo*) comes from the same root as the noun “tabernacle/tent” (*skenos*), the place where God spoke to Moses and where God’s glory was seen:

- “When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses.” – Exodus 33:9.
- “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” – Exodus 40:34.

This “glory” (*doxa*) that was present in the tabernacle for the people of Israel is the manifest presence of God that is now visible in Jesus, which will later be revealed in his death, resurrection and ascension (“*His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.*” – 12:16). The identification of Jesus as “the Father’s only Son” emphasizes Jesus’ unique relationship with God, while stating that he was “full of grace and truth” echoes the Hebrew word pair “steadfast love” and “truth” (*hesed, emet*: “*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*” –

Exodus 34:6); this now speaks of God's covenantal love and faithfulness available to all people in Jesus Christ.

- “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 … The incarnation binds Jesus to the ‘everydayness’ of human experience.” – O’Day.

The validity of John the Baptist’s witness is conveyed by the present tense verbs that introduce it: *“This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”* (1:15). John’s witness is not locked in the past but continues into the present. John recognizes the pre-existent Word in the person of Jesus. The grace and truth of the Word became the “grace upon grace” of the community’s life; the double use of “grace” (*charis*) underscores the superabundance of gifts available to the believer through the incarnate Word. As the gift of the Law came through Moses, now *“grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (1:17), the first time the Evangelist names our Lord in this Gospel. While no person has ever seen God, it is *“God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”* (1:18).

While the twelve days of the Christmas season are drawing to a close, the good news of the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ is a message that brings us “tidings of comfort and joy” every day of the year, the good news that in the birth of Jesus God chose to dwell among us as one of us, and that because of his death and resurrection our Lord abides with us always as he will one day *“come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end.”* (Nicene Creed).

- “Instead of becoming the son of an emperor or legislator, the Lord chose nothing but poverty and mean surroundings, everything that was plain and ordinary, and in the eyes of most people obscure … Christ made no ostentatious display of riches which would have made people frightened to approach him; he assumed no royal state, which would have driven people away from his presence. No, he came among ordinary people as one of themselves, offering himself freely for the salvation of all.” – Stephanie Perdew.

While it did seem strange to shop for Christmas in the heat of the summer, it was a reminder that the good news of Christmas is not confined to one season “in the bleak

midwinter" but is joy that is ours in every season. It is the good news that in the birth of the child of Mary God fulfilled the promise that the very Word of God would now dwell among us as *Emmanuel*, the promise our Risen Lord would proclaim to his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). While we may put our decorations into storage when the twelve days of the Christmas season draw to a close, the message of Christmas will continue to bring us joy 365 days of the year as we celebrate the good news that every day "*we hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*"

Amen.