

Sermon for First Sunday after Christmas Dec 30 2007 Year A
Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 147, Galatians 3:23-25;4:4-7, John 1:1-18
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The Gospel of St John was somewhat late in being accepted as a Gospel in the Christian community because of its Gnostic associations. There are those who love this gospel and those who do not know what to make of it and, to this day, there remain differences of opinion on the origin of John's Gospel.

Each of the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, present a somewhat different perspective of Jesus. The Jesus of John's gospel comes from Nazareth in Galilee but the people of Galilee do not accept him. Jesus is Joseph's son. He and his mother are invited guests at a wedding in Cana. Jesus made his home in Capernaum. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is a sign of division and there is a constant struggle over religious truth between Jesus and those who resist his teaching. In John's gospel, when faced with Jesus, the choice is to either come to believe in him and walk in the light, or choose the darkness of non-belief and expect judgment and condemnation.

The goal of John's gospel is to persuade the listeners that what he says is true. He ends his gospel with this statement: *It is this disciple who testifies to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.* He writes in such a manner that one could say he is telling his readers what to think and does it in a way that is believable, that is authentic. To put it another way: the writer of John's gospel inspires confidence in his written word.

Chapter 1 verses 1-18, which we have just heard read, is the prologue to John's gospel. Like the overture of a symphony it states the main themes of the Gospel, themes such as light, life, truth, the world, testimony and the

preexistence of Jesus the incarnate Logos who reveals God the Father. Biblical scholars believe that this prologue was an early Christian hymn. For those who are interested in poetry, this prologue, in its original language, it is like a poem in which the last word of one stanza becomes the first word of the next.

By the time of the writing of John's Gospel, some sixty or more years after the death of Jesus, John the Baptist was still remembered and still had followers. The Evangelist acknowledges the existence of John whom he introduces without any reference to his parents or background and then makes it clear that John is to play a subordinate role to that of Jesus.

For the Evangelist, John the Baptist and Jesus are both *sent*. In other words they were both on a mission from God. In chapter two, the writer of John's Gospel has John the Baptist describe himself using the words of Isaiah the prophet *I am the voice of one crying in the desert, Make straight the way of the Lord.*

Another theme is introduced here in that the Evangelist makes it clear that the Baptist *came to testify to the light*. This statement would seem to imply that, from John's point of view, Jesus was on trial from the very beginning of his ministry. Having people testify for Jesus runs through the Gospel as we find the Samaritan woman, scripture itself, the crowds, the Spirit and the disciples testifying about Jesus.

The theme of unity or connectedness to the Hebrew Scriptures is also transmitted here in the simple language of *in the beginning*. John is connecting his Good News with the opening of the Hebrew Scriptures. We read in opening verse of the Book of Genesis: *In the beginning when God*

created the heavens and the earth. John connects Jesus with this creative life force; Jesus was there in the beginning and before the beginning of creation; Jesus was with God and Jesus was God. The Hebrew Scriptures was a story of God's calling a people to be a nation, a holy nation, a people set apart. It was a story of exile and return; a story of infidelity by people and fidelity of God to God's covenant *You will be my people and I will be your God.*

There were those in the Jewish community looking for a Messiah, a king, who would restore them and their dignity once again; who would free them from the yoke of foreign oppression, who would bring them from the darkness of their chaos to the light of a new nation. John connected Jesus with the creation of order out of chaos and in him *all things came to be and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race.*

Even as he came to be the light of the human race the reality was that *he came to his own but his own people did not accept him.* John did not distinguish between people of Galilee or the people of Judah. Neither does John distinguish between the Pharisees, the Sadducees, Scribes, Herodians, or Lawyers. Instead he puts everyone under the banner of "The Jews." One sad result of this in Christian history is that the Jewish community as a whole has been held responsible for the death of Jesus. For John, they are a symbol of all who oppose Jesus and they will be condemned by the founders like Moses and Abraham who testify to Jesus. The hostility found in the Johannine gospel toward the Jews may have had its roots in the expulsion of Christian Jews from the synagogues, referred to in John 9:27. In today's

world it would be better if we were to replace statements like “The Jews” by using phrases like “The Judeans.” Or “Jesus’ enemies.”

To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice but by God. In other words the law is not what is going to save one any more. Rather it is a question of being born again, being born from above; living a spiritual life. God is inviting us again to *choose life* just as God invited the people in the desert when God spoke through Moses, *today I have set before you, life or death, blessings and curses, choose life that you and your descendents may live.* To *choose life* is to choose to live in the light; to live in the spiritual life to which we were called in the beginning of time and which is still being offered to us. God is calling us to enter into the kingdom of God within.

And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. For the Hebrew people the tent of the Lord was that place where God resided; in which the ark of the covenant was placed. When they finally built their Temple, it was in this ‘holy of holies’ that the Lord lived. John is saying that God has now come and pitched his tent within us. God has made his home within us. Those who have experience of camping know what it is to pitch one’s tent; it is to create a space that belongs to you; it is to stake the tent in such a way that it will not blow away with the first wind. God has pitched his tent within us; God does not want this tent to be blown away. The tent is the symbol of the presence of God. So, if God has pitched his tent within us, then God wants us to increase our conscious awareness of God’s presence;

make a clear decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God; make time for prayer and meditation to improve our conscious awareness of God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.

From this relationship to God through Jesus we will receive *grace in place of grace*; or, a better translation is *Grace upon grace*. In other words we will receive an abundance of grace freely given like the wine at the wedding feast of Cana, the twelve baskets left over after the feeding of the five thousand, the boats filled with fish. God does nothing in half measures. Rather, we receive the grace of God in abundance.

In these brief eighteen introductory verses John has established the themes he will flesh out in the remainder of his gospel to persuade those listening to him that Jesus is the fulfillment of promises made; Jesus is the son of God who is the light to the world, a Good Shepherd, and one who gave his life that we might know the depth of his love.