

Sermon, 30 December 2007—Sunday in the Christmas Octave

Isaiah 61:10—62:3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-5;4:4-7; John 1:1-18

Several times recently I have heard on the radio the enthusiastic invitation to enroll in the University of Minnesota Law School, which claims to be “rigorous, relevant, and ready.” I’ve become so entranced by this phrase that I am almost ready to sign myself up. But I think what caught me is not only how clever the slogan is, but how compactly it states what a church is at its best.

The glorious opening of the Gospel of John, which can sound so abstract, even dry, actually states the same hope. The writer is trying to state a new idea with utter clarity. It is this: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Everything else there had already been confirmed either by the history of Israel or by the philosophy of Plato. But John wants to stress that what occurred in Jesus Christ truly is new, so he chose new words to tell it.

We can hear that this Gospel sounds different from the other three. Matthew, Mark, and Luke carry forward the story of God’s saving activity among the Jewish people; they shape their Gospels to be in continuity with Hebrew Scripture in many ways. John, though, follows the lead of the Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt.

The Jews of Alexandria were the first to be “rigorous, relevant, and ready.” These were the Jews who translated Hebrew Scripture into Greek, because that was the dominant language of their day, the language they had already adopted as their own. These were the Jews who began to use Greek philosophy to interpret their sacred texts, because that was the dominant world view of their day, the perspective all educated people had adopted as their own. Philo, the great Jewish scholar and contemporary of Jesus, wrote

a commentary on the Torah using the terms and outlook of Plato's thought. It was as shocking and novel then as using Marxism to interpret the Gospel was in the last century, or using German historical analysis to interpret the Bible was before that. What is startling is this: I could quote Philo to you, and you would think I was reading a little known passage from John, because Philo talks about the Divine Word, by whom all things were made.

In other words, the writer of the Gospel of John was not a dewy dreamy mystic, but a thinker on the cutting edge, trying to find the most "rigorous, relevant, and ready" ideas to present the identity of Jesus. John was rigorous in his opening words, because he took the Scripture he had inherited and the philosophy he had learned, and he used the minimum necessary from each to weave together a new claim about who God is and how God acts. He was relevant in these words, because he took the history of Jesus he had inherited and the range of human response he had learned, and he pinpointed the overlap between the two in a new claim about who human beings are and how they act. He was ready, because, just as that earlier John came to testify to the light, so the later John, the writer, wrote a white-hot testimony of his own that to this day is terrifying in its immediacy.

How is John rigorous? He opens his Gospel with the same words that open the Greek translation of the first verse of Genesis: "In the beginning." And he rounds that echo of Moses off, by reminding us that "the Law came through Moses." At the same time, he speaks of the "Word," which seems at first a Jewish term, since, at the opening of Genesis, God creates by speaking and since the "Word of the Lord" comes to all the legitimate Jewish prophets; but "Word" is a Greek word—"logos"—which means, not simply a spoken expression, but a principle of order, what brings coherence. That is the function of "words," as the Greeks understood things. To claim

that what God says is also God seems a bit strained. However, if through speech one can organize and sustain an approach to what one cares about and is interested in, there is power there. The power to name the patterns of life, which are hidden and latent on a daily basis, and to raise them into expression, even into existence, by being able to articulate them—that power ultimately IS God. God doesn't simply talk, but brings into being through speech. What could be more Greek? Remember Socrates! It is not that farfetched: if human speech can bring to consciousness and cause the memory of an idea to be, then divine speech ought to be able to bring to existence and cause the reality of the idea to be. Notice that once this omnipotent Word becomes enfleshed, what it brings to humanity are two quintessentially Greek, not Jewish, ideals: grace and truth. “The Law was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

How is John relevant? For the writer of this Gospel, the trauma of the rejection of God remained continuous from the past to the present: “He came to his own, and his own received him not.” But, given the way John sets up his Gospel, what is rejected is not a person or an idea, but what sustains reality itself: the Word who made all things and who now has enfleshed himself as Jesus. Once again, the echoes take us back to the Creation: God walks in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, coming to his own, but his own, their mouths still salivating with the knowledge of good and evil, receive him not. The echoes take us back to Moses: God leads his people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, as on eagles' wings, to Sinai, where God spoke his ten words directly to the people he had chosen out of all the nations to be his own, but his own receive him not, and turn to Moses, pleading that he, not God, speak to them; and once Moses goes up the mountain to receive the words of God, God's own fabricate and

adore a golden calf. And in this Gospel, precisely this happens to Jesus, in an escalating round of hysterical blood-curdling conversations in which those he is talking to assert that they are children of Abraham and disciples of Moses in order to reject the one who called Abraham and spoke to Moses; and the writer of the Gospel depicts the fury of their unwillingness to receive the enfleshed Word as a final frenzy of rejection in which the Temple priests claim to have no king but Caesar, forswearing every Psalm that proclaims “the LORD is king!” Of course, for John, nothing less than this was the anguish of his own community and of his own missionary efforts: “he came to his own, and his own received him not.” That is always the torment of those who find their lives transformed: it is hardest of all to speak about these things with those we love the most. Why is it nearly impossible to persuade those who know us to join us in a new life?

How is John ready? Neither Matthew nor Mark ever say “I;” they never speak of themselves; nor do they ever directly address the reader as “you.” Luke does so only in his courtly opening dedication to Theophilus, but then Luke turns entirely to narrative. John, though, at the end of his Gospel speaks directly to the reader. He says he has “written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name.” Later, he adds that if all the things Jesus did were written down, “I suppose that the world itself could not contain all the books that would be written”—a rather whimsical case of writer’s cramp. Twice, at the crucifixion and the resurrection, he speaks of the testimony of the Beloved Disciple, saying it is “so you may believe” and adding “we know that his testimony is true”—just as he said, in the words we heard today, “we have seen his glory ... and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” In other words, John presses out of the text

towards the reader. All this is immediate. All this is right now, as I, John, write, and as you, who read or listen, receive these words; it is present, so you may believe. John is ready and is already writing; the question is whether or not those who hear his words are equally ready and are already believing.... You see: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” What became flesh is the ever present God. This is not a past event, because what entered human existence is the One to whom all things are eternally present. So our earthly existence is brought into the perpetual present of God. God enfleshed means that the unending benevolent attention of God has entered human existence, and there will never be a moment in which grace and truth are not ready for us, if we only turn to receive them.

So only one thing remains to be asked: what of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Saint Cloud, Minnesota? Are we as “rigorous, relevant, and ready” as our patron saint was? I mean no disrespect when I murmur “I don’t think so.”

For John, rigor was to take the Scriptural story and to meld that with the vocabulary of his current world view. He was not selling out; he was discovering that, with discipline and care, one can learn to tell the old story in the new language. That requires knowing the history of God’s people from the inside out, because to be Christian is to abide in God’s love, and it also requires understanding contemporary expressions and convictions from the outside in, because to be Christian is to be in the world, but not of it. In every age, much arises that is compatible with the Good News of God in Christ, because the Spirit blows where it will, as in the unpredictability of evolution. We must be humble and brave enough to say, “that new idea you think puts you beyond God, if it is a description of reality, if it is a statement of truth, can also be a new way to proclaim what God was doing in Christ.”

For John, relevance was to remember that the Good News has always been a difficult sale. “He came to his own, and his own received him not.” We are his own as fellow Christians, and we have difficulty receiving his words. The effort of rigor, with which John wrote his Gospel, is overlooked by those who think of this Gospel as “spiritual” or full of “love,” rejecting his clear-eyed bitter depiction of self-destruction by those who would rather not know “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Reality and truth are not, in fact, where human beings invest their enterprise or their leisure. This is the point: all of us live and move and have our being in reality and truth, really and truly; we belong to them; we are enfleshed and enspirited; when reality and truth rise up to face us, as in illness and death, we know we are “their own;” but all too often, we would rather *not* know reality and truth; we would rather dwell in our fantasies; so we creatures of reality, when faced with truth, are tempted to “receive them not.” As human beings enmeshed in culture, we are increasingly fascinated by and addicted to what is virtual, not actual. We neither understand our planet nor our bodies, and so have no idea how what we believe and how we act on what we believe affects them. I dare say those of us sitting here do not understand our city or this church’s place in it. This is the very issue of this congregation’s outreach in our community. The Jesus in John’s Gospel is the one who says, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” As you might expect, those who were religious and virtuous overheard him and protested, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” And Jesus bafflingly answers, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now that you say ‘we see,’ your sin remains.” To know you do not see and need to see is the place to start; to insist that you already see compounds darkness.

For John, readiness was his willingness to speak directly: “we know this testimony is true,” and “this was written so that you may believe.” Even if we do not say those things out loud, is it possible to live that way? Isn’t it possible for you and me to meet others ready with what we know is true about us and ready to invite and receive what is true about them, in other words, to be fully and transparently present to each other?

In a month, we will have our annual meeting. Surely a church can arrive at being at least as good as a law school! It is not beyond us, in the coming year, to strive to become “rigorous and relevant and ready,” and to pray that the One through whom all things came into being might fill us with all grace and truth and give us the power to become children of God, not by blood, nor by fleshly will, nor by human will, but by the power of the Eternal Source, of the Only-begotten Word, and of the Life-giving Spirit, who are the one God, whom we praise this day and hope to praise in the Life Abundant, where we will be one with Christ in glory.