

First Christmas
St. Anne's
December 28, 2014
Solomon and John

Happy Christmas everyone! Wow, you came back! After the experience of my first Christmas Eve at St. Anne's which, by the way was in my reckoning *way* over the top (in a good way), I admit it has been more than a little intimidating to think about being the celebrant and preacher today---and those of you who were here for one or both of the Christmas services have to agree *that* was a hard act to follow!

How many of you have been traveling to see family in the last couple of weeks? How many of you have hosted family and friends in the same period? Baked enough yet? Washed enough dishes? Watched enough football? Anyone stressed out after one or more of those obligatory family gatherings where your Christian charity was *as* sorely tested as the elastic in the waist of your pants? Is anyone ready to take a deep breath, and relax into some comfortable routine? OK then, the beautiful Christmas decorations aside, today on this First Sunday after Christmas, we slide back into our Good Book Club readings, pairing up the story of King Solomon with the first chapter of John, who introduces us to the Incarnate

Word. Now, if you are wondering how I am going to pull this one off, I will only tell you it took the last of the Hershey's Kisses to get it done.

Solomon, as you might recall, was the son of David the King, by Bathsheba, whom David stole from the murdered Uriah. We are told today that David has gone to sleep with his Ancestors after ruling for 40 years. But before his death, the Queen Mother Bathsheba, at the advice of the prophet Nathan, went to David to plead Solomon's cause over David's son Adonijah, whom some thought (including Adonijah) would be the next king. David had Solomon crowned and secured as his successor, and gave Solomon some fatherly advice before he handed over the family business and died:

Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord our God, walk in his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. (1 Kings 2:2-3)

Solomon rose to the occasion of being King in typical fashion of the day, by eliminating (read: killing off) his competition: Adonijah his half-brother, Joab the general, and Shimei of Benjamin in Northern Israel. After these deeds were done, Solomon married a daughter of Pharaoh. *Then* he begins to offer sacrifices at the high places of Gibeon, up to a thousand animals burned up at one sitting. It was there that Solomon heard God speak to him in a dream, giving him the opportunity to ask for wisdom and an understanding mind to discern good and evil so that he

could govern wisely. Claiming to be as “a little child,” Solomon pleased God with his humility and his restraint in asking for riches, power and success. God then promised all of those, as well a long life, *if* Solomon walked in God’s ways, keeping God’s statutes and commandments. The familiar tale of Solomon judging the ownership of an infant claimed by two women comes right after this, and was used as an illustration that God indeed had given Solomon a wisdom which attracted representatives of many neighboring nations who sought his advice and counsel. Treaties for peace allowed Solomon to concentrate on the building of the Temple, which had not happened in his father David’s time as hoped. The massive Temple project required raw materials, builders and craftsmen from many places as well as indentured labor, and a prolonged period of negotiated peace gave Solomon the resources to complete the Temple in about 7 years. The Temple was meant to be the permanent place where in the innermost sanctuary dwelled the Ark of the Covenant, holding the tablets of Moses from Horeb, and creating a literal resting place for God. Even so, Solomon asked

...but will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

Solomon prayed that God would hear his prayers; that God would open God’s own eyes to the house Solomon built for him, heeding and forgiving the people.

So did Solomon *continue walking in God's ways* as advised by his father David, and as highly recommended by God himself? Eventually, as usual in our study of Judges and Kings, not so much... While building the Temple, Solomon also began building and furnishing a luxurious palace complex for himself, using forced slave labor; taking twice as long to complete as the Temple. He took many foreign wives (around 700 princesses) and concubines (about 300 of those), and he not only allowed his foreign wives to worship their gods, but he built them places to do so. (Imagine trying to keep 700 princesses happy...) It was after this that God told Solomon that because he did not keep God's covenants and statutes that the kingdom would be lost to his family. Because of God's promise to David, was not to happen to Solomon but to one of his sons. So though Solomon had achieved much, and rulers of foreign lands had come to visit and pay homage to him, including the Queen of Sheba, the rest of Solomon's reign of 40 years was filled with competition and strife, and before he died and went to sleep with *his* ancestors, all but one of the tribes of Israel was taken from his rule. Poor Solomon, known from the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew as the one who in all his glory could not compare to one lily in a field. So before I start quoting Shakespeare's Hamlet on "what a piece of work is man..." we come to the Gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God. This poetic metaphoric image of God as Word and Word as God is John's Nativity Story. No baby in a manger, with young anxious parents receiving shepherds and foreign kings. No star in the sky. No angels singling Glory to God in the Highest. John is proclaiming instead that Jesus, the Word, introduced in his early adulthood, is the embodiment of the very nature of God---the One who *was* before the beginning of all things---the Creator, life and light itself, that could not be overcome by darkness. Jesus is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, unaccepted by his own on earth, and yet carrying power to give to those born of God to become children of God. John says through the words of the Baptist, that though the Law came from Moses, grace and truth come from the only Son of God.

What are we to make of such a claim? John's Christmas story lands on us like those thunderstorms from last week. Boom! No chance to warm up to the idea of Emmanuel, God with us, through the gentle bleats of the small sheep who were scurrying around on the floor in the Christmas pageant. No sweet stretch of the imagination in thinking of God as a baby who would need a time of basic sustenance and safety before he could manage any saving work in the world. The Word is already *here*, since before the beginning, before there was time, or place, or kin, or life or death. If we missed the crazy fiery warnings of John the Baptist,

there is no time to get ready. No seven years to build him a Temple in which to live, no time to negotiate position, or purpose; no time to find our sunglasses before being blinded by the dazzling, penetrating light of him. God has broken into our world and become one of us. *One of us*. God incarnate. Word made flesh.

I don't know about you, but this passage from John has always set me on edge. It is both deeper and simpler than I can grasp, because it is trimmed to the raw-boned truth of God's desperate love of us, and the length and depth and breadth of God's willingness to communicate that love. For all of its metaphoric language, this passage from John is startling in its force, and in its absence of pretension. And I believe it disturbs me because it wants something from me. Something from all of us. It calls for us to stop, whiplash stop, and face our call to be children of God. When a Mother begins her labor to deliver a newborn, her world stops and nothing else matters. The theologian and mystic Frederick Buechner has written that to be born again as a child of God, we too labor, straining through our secret battles and our private demons, to work our way into the light, even while we are so often more comfortable and at home in the darkness. And as we labor, God labors too----to deliver what is whole in us from what is broken. God labors as a mother labors, for God not only made us, he *became* us, saving us from ourselves, making love known in the world in a way that would have never been imaginable to Solomon in all his glory, to David, to

Jacob, or to Abraham. The Word became flesh, and lived among us, and suffered with us, and died with us. From his fullness we have received forgiveness of our sins, and grace upon grace. Labor, sweat, blood, breath. Incarnation. The Word made flesh. As terrifying and as powerful as inexhaustible love, and lightening bolts.

As we move quickly beyond our Christmas celebrations of the Incarnation of Jesus as an *event*: finding places for new gifts, recycling the Christmas tree, and filing photographs and memories of time spent with loved ones either from this holiday season or from those long past; perhaps we would do well to move towards an apprehensive appreciation of the Incarnation as God's ongoing cry for relationship---one that does not get packed away with the decorations. As we step into the sacramental expression of God dwelling in us and we in God in the Eucharist this day, may we be open to the miracle of that call to abandon the building of temples and the elimination of our enemies, to walk into the light as children of God. I close with part of the 15th of the Divine Meditations of John Donne:

Wilt thou love God, as he thee? Then digest,
My soul, this wholesome meditation,
How God the Spirit, by angels wait on
In heaven, doth make his temple in thy breast.
The Father having begot a Son most blessed,
And still begetting, (for he ne'er begun)
Hath deigned to choose thee by adoption,
Coheir to his glory, and Sabbath's endless rest;

Twass much, that man was made like God before,
But, that God should be made like man, much more. Amen.