

Sermon Christmas Day 2015
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John 1:1-18
God Makes Children of God

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Merry Christmas!

Last night we heard the beautiful account of the birth of Jesus with Mary and Joseph, Angels and Shepherds, and the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. People love that story. Even non-Christians enjoy hearing it, if only for sentimental reasons. This morning we heard a text, not as familiar to irregular Churchgoers. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This seems so cryptic. So mysterious. And yet John chapter one has been the appointed Gospel text for Christmas Day for hundreds of years. And this text tells us the same story as last night, yet in a different way. Sure John omits the angels and shepherds, the cute village of Bethlehem, even the Virgin Mary. Yet he gives much more detail than Saints Matthew and Luke combined. Just listen to these words. “The Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without him was not one thing made that was made.” Who is John talking about? Who is this Word?

The Word is the Son of God. He was with God from the beginning. He was not created by God, but rather all things were created by him, and nothing that was created was made without him. The Word is uncreated. He is eternally *with* God. And yet He *is* God.

This seems complicated. It's no wonder this text is less popular than the ones we heard last night. Yet, do not let its lack of popularity fool you. This message from John is of incredible importance. You don't understand the Christmas story if you do not understand who the Word is. If you know who the Word is, you know who Jesus is. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth."

For those who do not faithfully come to church and hear Jesus preached to them, who do not confess the Nicene Creed with Christ's flock or confess the Apostles' Creed at home in daily prayer, this Christmas message sounds convoluted. But if you have confessed the Trinity, that there is *One* God yet *three* distinct Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and have heard it preached over and over again that Jesus is true God and true man, John's Christmas Sermon doesn't seem confusing. Rather, you see that John is making a clear point. The Son of God is not the Father. He is with the Father. He is at the Father's side. Yet he is a distinct Person. He even has a distinct name, the Word. He is not created, but begotten from eternity from God the Father. He has no beginning and he has no end. And yet, the Word is not a separate god, but he is the One and only God with the Father.

And this Word, whom John has introduced and described so well, became flesh. So now you see, the Son of God was God's Son *before* he became flesh. He was the Word with God from the beginning. And now, he becomes flesh. So now look back to last night, to that baby in the manger, swaddled by his mother, adorned by lowly shepherds and praised by splendid angels. Now you know who he is. He is the eternal Word, the only begotten Son of the Father, who was with God and who is God. He has

become flesh, that is, he has become a human being. The eternal Word assumed human flesh, blood, and bones, a human soul, and a human will. And he did this, so that he could save our flesh and blood from death, our soul from hell, and our will from damnation.

John's Christmas message brings splendid light on that manger in Bethlehem, and was no doubt the inspiration of the Lutheran Church's greatest hymn writer, Paul Gerhardt, when he wrote:

O Jesus Christ, Thy manger is
 My paradise at which my soul reclineth
 For there, O Lord, Doth lie the Word
 Made flesh for us; here in Thy grace forth shineth. (LSB 372)

No one can see God. And if we could, we would die! Even his angels cause men to tremble in fear. Nothing can contain God. He has no limits. And yet, God comes to us, so that he cannot only be seen, but held and felt. And even greater than that, he joins our flesh. He is one with us. The creator has joined his creatures and become their brother!

How did this take place? What did men do to get God to do this? For what is God rewarding us? What have you done to cause the eternal Word to take human flesh? Nothing. Ambrose of Milan wrote in his ancient Advent hymn "Savior of the Nations, Come":

Not by human flesh and blood,
 By the Spirit of our God,
 Was the Word of God made flesh—
 Woman's offspring, pure and fresh. (LSB 332)

God did not take counsel with any man. No good thing done by us caused God to become a man. Rather, God saw our wretched state as sinners. He saw that we could not enter into heaven, but must die. He saw that we could not be his children, because his children must be holy. So God, desiring to save us, sent his only begotten Son to take on our human nature, to take our place under the law, to serve us by dying and being condemned in our place. Christ took on human flesh, so that his flesh could be torn and bruised for our sake. It was your sin and the sin of all mankind that caused the Word to become man. And he did so because he loves you too much to simply damn you to hell.

So the Word became flesh, not by the will of man, but by the power of the Holy Spirit he was incarnated in the womb of the Virgin Mary. It was God's doing alone. And all who receive him, who believe on his name, are given the right to become children of God.

To receive the right to become children of God you have to believe in Christ Jesus, that he is true God and true man, that he died on the cross for your sins, that he rose from the dead for you. And yet, this is an impossible thing to do. Saint Paul writes, "No one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:3) This is why we confess in Luther's explanation of the third article of the Creed, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." And Saint John says in his Christmas message, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the Light shined in the darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it." And "He came to his own, but his own did not receive him."

We are by nature children of darkness. We are opposed to light. Although the Word made us, when he comes to us, even as he shares our flesh and blood, we did not

receive him. Our flesh, that is, our human nature makes us hostile to God. Saint John writes, “That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is Spirit.” (John 3:7) We must be born in a different way than we are to be children of God.

Saint John writes, “Who have been born not from blood, nor from the will of the flesh, nor from the will of men, but from God.” This means that you do not become a child of God, because you are born from Christian parents. You don’t pass on faith to your children through the bloodstream. Nor will you or your children naturally want to be Christians. According to our natural flesh, we don’t desire to be children of God. Rather, we become God’s children by *his* will.

So just as it was not by the schemes, plans, or desires of people that Christ, the eternal Word took on human flesh and became a Son of man, neither do we become children of God by our own schemes, plans, or desires. Rather God desires for us to become his children. It is his work. And this is good news, because if God did not make us his children, we would never pursue it or obtain it. Saint Paul writes in our Epistle lesson, “He saved us, not by works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs, having the hope of eternal life.”

Just as God’s mercy caused the Word to become flesh, perfect the Law for us, and die for our sins, so also God’s mercy causes the Holy Spirit to wash us and regenerate us through the same Christ Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit, who creates saving faith in us; who drowns our sinful flesh and places Christ in its place; who makes us God’s children. And the Holy Spirit makes us God’s children in no other way than through God’s Word. The

Word of God, which became flesh must be spoken to us. In Baptism, God's Word must come to us to make us his children. And every day of our lives, God's Word's, who was at his side from eternity, must enter our ears and heart constantly to sustain this faith. If we do not receive God's Word, we do not receive Jesus. And if we do not receive Jesus, we do not receive the right to become children of God. So thank God that it does not depend on our blood or on our will, but on God. Otherwise we would surely reject this word and with it our adoption as God's children. But as it is, God has caused us believe in this Word. To trust in his flesh pierced for us, even to eat it in his Sacrament. God has caused us to be his children, even as he caused the Word to become flesh.

Merry Christmas, children of God.