Through the written word and the spoken word, God help us to hear your Living Word, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

JOHN’S CHRISTMAS STORY, John 1:1-18

Imagine arriving to a pageant that told our gospel story today! What would that look like? Who are the characters?

How would one depict “the Word”? The Word was in the beginning, without an identifiable form. But the Word also became flesh; we just don’t have the details of exactly how. The poetry of John’s prologue is mysterious and even enchanting. It’s hard to envision concretely though… a pageant director would have a hard time writing lines and developing costumes!

It might not make the most fun pageant, but John tells his own Christmas story. This is a story of God coming to earth, a story of God incarnate. And John has particular pieces of the story he wants the readers to know and hear in his telling of the Christmas story.

This is a factor in all storytelling. Think of a fish story—you know, the stories where the fish grows everything time the story is told. In addition to the fish changing size, different storytellers and different audiences will result in a changed story.

Consider a fish story told by one fisherman to other. The storyteller would want to include the kind of fish and where they caught it. The hearer might ask about the weather, about the rod and reel, and the boat. Two people who take real joy in fishing and for whom it is an important hobby will share a story with details that might result in another big catch!

When the fisherman tells the story to someone who does not like fishing but does care about them, the hearer might ask questions about who went fishing woth the,. The conversation might turn to people and relationships. “Oh, John was on the trip. I remember him. How are his kids doing?” People who don’t share the hobby but *do* share a care for one another would share a story where the fishing is just one part.

Consider a hearer who loves to cook, that’s me, and how that might affect the story. The fisherman would be prodded to talk about the weight of the fish and what became of it. Was the whole fish used for one recipe? Or multiple? How was it cooked? What spices? Where fish tacos involved?!?! A fisherman and a cook could go from a fish story to a recipe swap.

The same story can become many different conversations. The storyteller and the audience shape the story together based on the information available and the interests of the teller and hearer. That is exactly what happens in John’s prologue when he tells his version of the Christmas story.

John wrote the latest of the four gospel somewhere around 90 to 100 CE. For John, it was important to name the cosmic context of Jesus’ birth and life on earth. He is writing later and perhaps has different priorities which relate Jesus to a wider span of time and space. Later readers might have already heard the concrete stories of Jesus’ birth as they were passed down through early Christian communities. But as time went on, the connection points shifted. How was the story relevant through generations? How could John help keep the life of Christ alive as the generations passed?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The Word, which we come to understand is Jesus, was present in the beginning, at the time of creation. The Word has been present for many many generations and will continue to be active for many more!

The Word was both present with God and *was* God. We get small beginnings of a Trinitarian formula. A both/and understanding of the Word and of God.

John lays the groundwork for a Cosmic Christ. The fullness of creation came through the Word, the entire cosmos connects to this mysterious being. John writes of the Word as beyond space and time. Then in later verses, he writes of the Word becoming flesh among us and being *rooted* in a particular space and time. This can start to feel like a word game and is easily the most esoteric of the Christmas stories. John made cosmic connections as well as detailed and specific connections.

Our God is eternal. God among us is not disconnected from the God who created us. Our God worked through the formless chaos to make the world, so our God can certainly work in each of our hearts for grace and peace. Our God is bigger than our cities, countries, and even our planet, which connects us to something far beyond ourselves. Yet God is also specific and particular—God shows up in the body of a human at one time in one place. *And* in each of us exactly where we are.

All of this makes me wonder, what would a gospel written today would sound like. What is most important for a Christmas story written in 2023 or 2024? Why is Christianity relevant through the generations?

Each of us would have particular pieces of our relationship with God that could contribute to a 21st century gospel. I am not sure exactly what the gospel would say—and certainly it would sound different coming from American Christians than from Palestinian Christians. From white American Christians and Black American Christians. From refugees carrying a prayer card of Jesus and from people who have lived safely in their homes for generations. From a queer Christian and a Christian who says the bible condemns queer relationships. From a small child and an adult—from an adult raised in the Church and an adult finding the Church or reconnecting with the Church after many years away.

The gospel would need to be centered in Christ, not in personal agenda. And I pray that the gospel would be unifying, while still comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. So many generations removed from Jesus’ life on earth, it is hard to imagine a gospel that is not sectarian in the same way our churches are. But… it is possible to imagine the individual gospels of our lives. How has Jesus been made real for each person? We all have a story or many many stories of Jesus being made real to us, and what is a gospel but the good news as made manifest in concrete reality!

Jesus is real to me because… I’ve seen food stretch to feed hundreds of migrants in camps on the Texas/Mexico border.

Jesus is real to me because… I’ve sat with people crying for forgiveness and we have somehow landed in a place of peace.

Jesus is real to me because… I’ve been supported through mutual aid when much of Texas lost power and water for a week during a winter storm.

Jesus is real to me because… I’ve been a part of communities of unlikely friends and seen the connective tissue that is prayer and fellowship.

Jesus is real to me because…

Our personal account of Jesus is important! It is gospel, it is good news! That is why St. Columba’s shares Faith Stories during worship! (2024 😉 )

Episcopalians don’t often speak of our personal relationship to Jesus or of personal testimony, yet that is part of what John offers us today in his prologue. He offers us a personal testimony for why the Word of God matters for him and he works to persuade his readers. He offers his own understanding of events that tell him of the reality of God. We read and learn from them. AND we have an opportunity to share how God is real for us too.

Each week we say, “As we are gathered, fed and sent by God, let us ask ourselves with whom will I share the good news?”

So, I ask with real seriousness…What is the good news you will share? With whom? How is Jesus real for *you*? Go and share. May it be so.

Amen.