

John 1:1–14 (15–18)

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Nativity of Our Lord, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 21 December 2011

Every once in a while, though it doesn't happen very often, the framers of the liturgical year give us an easier Christmas. This year Christmas falls on Sunday, which eliminates a service. Usually the first Sunday after Christmas follows right on the heels of Christmas Day, so you barely get done with one when you're on your way to the next. By the time you come out of a service Friday night, a service Saturday, and a service Sunday, it's enough. But this year we have just Christmas Eve and Christmas Day together, and then a whole week before the first Sunday after Christmas, which is of course traditionally called Low Sunday, like the Sunday after Easter, because people take the Sunday off, having been churched sufficiently for the season.

But I'll bet your experience is like mine. When the culture cranks the mythology of happiness and fulfillment and joy and delight up to the maximum, people in congregations can't help noticing that their lives don't conform to the expectations, that Christmas is not going to be orgasmic but pretty much the same as every other day of the week. They get disappointed, feeling that the television and the radio and the newspaper have succeeded in having the Christmas everybody dreams of, while we get stuck with the ordinary one. That normally happens, I guess, and then the disappointment erupts and people start to call the preacher. I've had some of the most complex difficulties of my whole ministry around the holidays, and I'm sure many of you have had the same, where one blame thing just leads to another.

This year we've got an eruption of death going. I come from one of those big old Norwegian American families, and I grew up with my uncles and aunts. I had twenty-seven of them at one time, and now I'm gradually running out. We were down this weekend to see one who is quite ill and near death, and I brought him the sacrament. We sat and visited for a while, then turned around and went home, and the phone rang. It was cousins out in Montana reporting that their father had died. You know how it goes: you go from funerals to Christmas and back to funerals again.

It reminds me of one of the best sermons I ever heard. It was preached by Edmund Steimle, old Ed Steimle. He was a professor at Philadelphia Seminary for a long time and then taught at Union Seminary, and he preached on *The Protestant Hour* years ago; it was a great program. He once preached a sermon called “From Bethlehem to Bedlam.” There was a hospital outside London called Bethlehem, and in Cockney it was shortened to Bedlam, and Bedlam of course became a synonym for uproar and trouble. We go from Bethlehem to Bedlam, from the birth of the Christ child to the Holy Innocents, just that fast. That’s the way it works.

Matthew 1: Conceived by the Holy Spirit

We’ve already fooled away enough time that I should be disciplined for it, so we’ll get to work. We can’t do eight texts in forty-five minutes, but we can do the text for Christmas Eve and the text for Christmas Day. The Christmas Eve text is pretty familiar to us, and the Christmas Day text, John 1, as familiar as it is, is inexhaustible. So we’ll take a little time on each, so that we can hopefully break them open and you can have some fun in your own listening.

Matthew’s version is stripped down. There are no choruses of angels. There is one who comes by night to Joseph in his dreams. There are no wise men, though Matthew tells the story of the wise men in the next chapter. There are no shepherds. Only the good Lord would think of putting angels and shepherds together in the same story: angels symbolizing all that is holy, and shepherds about as down and dirty as any profession gets. You know those terrible jokes about shepherds; I won’t tell you any of them. They are enough to give you an idea of how shepherds were regarded biblically. So Luke gives us a story that is just as colorful as it can be, and a lot of fun.

But Matthew seems most concerned about the issue of Jesus’ birth. By the normal standards it is premature, and by the usual standards it is just one birth among many in the whole history of humanity where passion has gotten a little ahead of protection and rejoicing in one another has gotten a little ahead of precaution. There has been fulfillment before the wedding, and therefore a birth a little less than nine months after the wedding took place. And so a rumor, and so a scandal, and so a family shamed, especially in rural communities. The fact that “bastard” remains a profane term among us is an indication of just what a stigma it was at one time.

I have an uncle, one of my dear uncles; they were all dear at one time. He is the only one left on one side of my family now. He was conceived in a haymow in southern Minnesota by a

traveling ballplayer and a nice girl from town. She turned up pregnant, and the issue of that match turned up in Saskatchewan as my grandparents' youngest son. He was sent up there by train, and they adopted him. He's a wonderful uncle, but in some ways he still bears the marks of that conception as he thinks about himself. It is painful, and in the old days it was a real stigma.

In fact, when the Scripture says that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, a lot of wise old heads nod and say, "We're not going to look into that too closely," because that is not an explanation the village is likely to buy. So in Matthew's time the church had to deal with the issue of Jesus' birth, and Jesus is still being scorned in that way.

Last fall I was going up to British Columbia, crossing the border at the airport in Vancouver, and got to visiting with a Palestinian who was working for Canadian customs. He was a Christian Palestinian. I asked if he was from Bethlehem, and he was. We started to talk, and he said, "You know, in Israel I was known as a foreigner, with an expletive in front of it, and here I'm known the same way. In Israel I was known as a child of that bastard Jesus, and here I'm still following him." It was really something to talk to him. The Israelis, for all their protests against anti-Semitism, don't mind a little slur against Jesus when they get the opportunity. He is the bastard from Bethlehem, and of course that goes all the way back.

So Matthew is not so interested in trying to explain it as in setting out the genealogy of Jesus, and above all in establishing that his birth was intentional, not simply an accident in the haymow or out behind the fence, but arranged by God himself. And so we get a wonderful story. It's interesting, and a matter of some speculation, that Matthew provides this fairly complete genealogy, a wonderful set of begats that includes Ruth and also some notorious sinners. Rahab ran a prostitution operation in Jericho. There are some people here who could raise questions, and that's kind of fun. But the genealogy goes through Joseph, and the emphasis of the story is that Joseph is not the father in the usual sense; the child is a child of the Holy Spirit.

Now, we don't want to go into this too much. I've heard way too many sermons on both sides. There is the recent seminary graduate, full of himself, talking about how the virgin birth is a myth. If you need to do that, do it at the pastors' conference, not on Christmas Eve. On the other hand, I've heard sermons explaining how it was really possible, which isn't very helpful either. The promise is that Jesus enters as God's own Son, God's beloved Son, and that he enters by God's intention. We'll see a lot of that in John 1.

So the angel goes to Joseph by night and tells him that the child Mary has conceived is from the Holy Spirit. He offers no more explanation than that, and we really don't need any more. He is a child of the Holy Spirit, and that promise materializes in Jesus' birth.

So we get the promise of Jesus as conceived by the Holy Spirit, and then attention shifts from conception to issue, from origins to birth, and we get a wonderful story of Jesus being born in fulfillment of the prophecy: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel." There we go: Emmanuel, God's name, together with the name Jesus. He is the son of David, and having been conceived by the Holy Spirit, he will save his people from their sins. As I mentioned last week, his name is not only a label but a job description. He is coming under these circumstances to save sinners, and that is the gift itself.

And so we see Joseph, a righteous man, unwilling to put Mary away even though he is suspicious as all get-out; and Mary, a faithful woman, accepting an onerous job that strips her of her reputation, but carrying on in the obedience of faith to give birth to the Christ child. And they call his name Jesus, and the whole story begins. The wise men show up, and it won't be ten minutes before Herod shows up, mad, using the sword to sort through the babies born at the time in hopes of putting any potential rival to death. So we go from Bethlehem to Bedlam all over again.

Now, this is not the kind of thing that generally gets discussed very extensively on Christmas Eve, but it is full of promise. And the promise is this: under the sign of the opposite, entering a world under contention, under the judgment of the village gossips who count back on the calendar and know Mary doesn't have a chance of establishing legitimacy for this child, under the sign of the usual thing that happens between eager brides and eager grooms, under the sign of a premature delivery, Jesus enters the world as a bastard, rejected. He enters the world as a sinner joined to sinners. You can bet that is Luther's take on this text.

But Luther likes to go a little further, to think of that little Christ child wrapped in his mother's arms. It's so beautiful. We have a little granddaughter now who is just a month old, and when she comes in her mother's arms, she is just now raising her head and looking around, trying to bring the rest of us in, to register. Here is the Christ child, the one in whom the Father of all is expressing himself, becoming a wee baby, burped and belched and held to his mother's breast. Here is the one through whom all things were made, now being made in Mary's womb and carried in her arms. There is a tenderness and beauty to this story that never ends. We don't look for Christ high and lifted up above all things, but in Mary's arms:

swaddled there, cuddled there, carried there, blessed and blessing. And so the story of the birth carries.

John 1: In the Beginning Was the Word

With that we turn to John 1:1–14. Of course, we get several cracks at this text through the year; it shows up again in Epiphany, and later on as well. That's a good thing, because you could preach on this text for a long time. What I want to do with you is just break it down. I think in order to preach on it, you almost have to take one section or another. The temptation is to cover the whole thing, and if you try it, you're going to skim all the way through it. You're just not going to be able to get into any depth, because each one of these verses pulls you down.

I don't know if it was you or somebody else I was telling about reading this text with one of my teachers way back at Luther Seminary and hearing him lecture on it. We studied the Gospel of John for ten weeks and got to verse 17, and that was verse 17 of chapter 1, and that was pushing awfully hard. There is so much here that you can never finish it.

First of all, we have the identity of the Christ child established. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God," and more than that, "the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." This is quite important, because there are often standard accounts of the Christian faith that make Jesus an accident, a kind of afterthought, necessary to clean up after the law failed. This text makes it clear that from the beginning, before anything that was made was made, it was always God's intention to come as near to us as our own flesh and blood. It was always God's intention to break beyond law, beyond restriction, beyond command, to break in upon our hearts and win us, to claim us as his very own.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." All of this is to make clear that Jesus comes right out of the heart of God, that he has always been there, was always intended, and that his incarnation followed out of his preexistence. "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." So the Son is not set apart from the creation as though only the Father, the eternal Creator, were at work in it. The Son, the Logos, is intimately involved in the creation. He is there, part of the whole creation, and without him was not anything made that was made.

And because he was from the beginning, he has life. “In him was life”: joy, the life that surges and blooms and blossoms and moves and dances through Christ Jesus into the creation. He was in the beginning, and because he was, he was involved in the making of all things, and is involved in the making of all things. In him is life. “And the life was the light of men.” That is, it is not simply the power of breath, of breathing, the *pneuma*; it is life and light. It is light that informs, that clears the way, that gives wisdom and blessing.

Now here is the cap of it all in this first paragraph. You can preach on this verse all by itself if you want to. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” When I think of this passage, I think of standing by people’s beds when they die, of being part of the story of someone’s death: death coming and taking hold, laying claim to the person and to everything the person is, shutting it down, shutting it out, stopping it. The darkness takes over. And yet in the midst of the darkness there is this: the darkness has not overcome it. The light remains. Think of a prairie night and a small light in the distance, twinkling and obscure but still shining. You get the sense that the darkness has not comprehended it. The darkness has not overcome it.

And that, of course, is the story of Jesus. He enters into the darkness. He becomes familiar with the darkness. He knows the darkness. He is attacked by the darkness. He faces the darkness head-on, but the darkness cannot overcome him. Nevertheless the light appears, and that light gives light to all people. That light is the light of everyone.

The Witness and the True Light

Now we get a little digression. John the Baptist is part of this story too, and so we go back to him. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.” There we go: the light. The beginning of the story of Jesus is the light that shows up in the darkness in John the Baptist. “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” That is, John the Baptist is a flashlight, a little indication that there is more light to come. Now Jesus enters as the one in whom the fullness of light appears. This is the true light, which gives light to everyone, the one, true, and only light, the light for everyone. And it is he who comes into the world.

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him.” Here we go again: the competition between light and darkness. “He was in the world, and the world was made

through him, yet the world did not know him.” It had no clue. In Luther’s famous phrase, it looked at him like a cow looking at a new gate. It didn’t know what to do with him. It just stood there chewing, wondering, “What in the world is this?”

“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” Even his own were mystified. What the heck is this? Who is this guy? Who is this masked man? What’s he up to? You remember the great story of Jesus’ brothers coming to get him because they think he is overheated and a little confused. Even his own do not know him.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” To all who did receive him, he came as life and light, with all his blessings. There we go: all of a sudden the door is open. Pecked at and hammered, walked by, mystified, offended, strange, and all of a sudden the door pops open and there he is. “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” That’s what is at stake here. God has given up on the law, on restriction, on restraint, on the impetus and demand of the law. He is now coming as close to us as our flesh and blood, so that we can become children, those who know him, who belong to him, who cherish him.

And this happens, of course, “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” That is, it happens not through any human effort, not through any struggle on our part, but by God’s will and promise and gift. He not only gives us the right to become children of God; he reaches out, puts his arm around us, pulls us in, and makes us his children. Because, of course, if all we had was a right, we would just stand there and stare and not know what in the world to do with it. We are born not of the will of the flesh. This is no choice or decision on our part. It is the gift and working of God, who takes hold of us through the Word.

The Word Became Flesh

And now it comes, verse 14, as magnificent as it gets. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” There you go. The Word became flesh.

I like to play with the word “express.” Think of what you did with the toothpaste this morning when you pushed it out of the tube onto your brush: you expressed it. Expressing is what you did with yourself in a conversation at coffee this morning as you expressed your hopes and dreams to a friend. Expressing is what you do when you put yourself out to another. God has

expressed himself in Christ. He has come out into the open by becoming flesh, so that if you want to see what God looks like, look at that baby getting burped on Joseph's shoulder and urping a little bit. That's God. Or look at him nursing at Mary's breast, cuddled and serene. She is holding on to his thumb, and he is nursing away, happily content in the warmth of Mary's love. There it is. That's God.

If you want to see what God is like, look at Jesus stooping to that poor woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years and saying, in effect, "It wasn't my clothes that made you well, lady; it was your faith." Or look at Jesus with that dear Syrophoenician woman, so daring and so full of faith: "Your faith has made your daughter well." Or look at him standing over Lazarus's tomb, calling out into the silence of death, "Lazarus, get up. Time to go to work. Come out here." That's God: God on his hind legs, God on two feet, God expressing himself in the life and breath of a man. And so we have seen his glory. We have seen his power and might. We have seen his greatness. We have seen his gift. We have seen everything he has expressed in this way.

And so the promise of Christmas Eve is the promise of Christmas Day. We have a little boy born too early, raised under the opprobrium of the community, about whom people have always asked, "Where does this kid come from? How did that happen?" We have a child who has cost his mother her early reputation, a child over whom Joseph has fussed and fumed, wondering how that conception really did happen. We have a boy emerging who is God in the flesh, a friend of sinners, who is coming. And so in John 1 we have one little snippet after another that, put together, becomes a whole paragraph full of God's goodness and love, a whole proclamation of the goodness of God. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

So Christmas, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, is one more opportunity to play with these magnificent stories. Generally, when I can get close to Luke on Christmas Eve, I like to play with the stories of the angels and the shepherds, that wonderful contrast between the ethereal and the earthy, between the blessed and the cockamamie. But even without that, you get this wonderful story from Matthew, and John commenting on it all, to make sure we know who this is who is coming into the world.

Questions and Answers

A comment on the story of the Palestinian customs officer.

Boy, was that ever touching. I had cleared Canadian customs and was picking up my suitcase to go through security again, and he was handling things at security. When I asked him if he was from Bethlehem and he told me he was, he said to me, “I don’t have any place. I don’t belong to anybody. I’m a child of that bastard. I don’t belong in Israel, and I don’t belong here.” And I said, “Well, here’s a brother of the bastard. You’ve got one.” And that man came out from behind the stand and threw his arms around me, and we stood there. That’s how faith works. You get neighbors even when you don’t know them.

I think you probably had better be careful with the term “bastard” on Christmas Eve, actually, but I love it. You remember that great passage in Luther’s Galatians commentary where Christ became the greatest thief, robber, adulterer, and fornicator in the whole history of the human race. Well, you can add bastard to that. But probably better be nice. Let the kids have some fun, but don’t forget to tell them at some point.

An observation that every village knows how to explain a premature pregnancy.

No kidding. Everybody in every little village anyplace in the world can explain a premature pregnancy. There’s no mystery to that. The obvious explanation is that they couldn’t contain themselves, and it was an accident, or no accident at all.

A comment from Julie that it is so difficult to preach on Christmas.

That’s right. Part of the problem is that the culture heaps up the expectations to the point where it’s just impossible to live up to them, so people live through Christmas with all sorts of disappointment and regret: “How come I’m not having the Christmas everybody else is?” Of course you can’t live up to those expectations, so you go under them, right down to the bottom where Christ goes, and that’s the fun of it.

I remember, when I was out in my first parish, there was a woman in the congregation who had made friends in an inappropriate way with several of the people she worked with. We were at a service of prayer for Christian unity over at the Assembly of God, and halfway into the service she looks over at me and says, “Let’s go, Pastor. I’m going to get the hell out of here. This is no place for a sinner.” Well, we both ran. Exactly right.

A comment that five hundred Muslims who want to become Christians are meeting in Cameroon to discuss how much of their tradition to leave behind.

I think we should all pray for their protection. Absolutely. Dear Tom, you know the great joy we have in this: new brothers and sisters. When I was in Tanzania several years ago, I got to participate in the baptism of three hundred and fifty Maasai people. When we were finished with the baptism, a little tiny rain cloud turned into a thunderstorm that roared just above us, over about two acres. The whole group got drenched, and everywhere around us it was dry. Well, the good Lord saw us baptizing, and he wanted to get in on the show. He did it all anyway.

God's peace to all of you. Merry Christmas and a joyous New Year. I enjoy this no end, and if you find other ways I can help you, I'd like to. God's peace, and we'll see you next week.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G34DgqfDul4>

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