

## More Than a Metaphor?

A Sermon on Luke 2:41-52 and John 1:1-5, 9-14

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

I just love that passage from John.

The lectionary actually recommends it for next Sunday,

but even if you get a repeat on the prologue of John,

I doubt you'll get the exactly same take on it

...unless you get a time-traveling preacher from say, the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Some of you may have heard of *Lectio Divina*

- it's a method of reflecting on scripture that I've never been terribly good at,

but it goes back 6<sup>th</sup> century monks like Saint Benedict, so I try.

In *Lectio Divina*, one bypasses the analytic part of the brain, and just listens

- listens with the ear of the heart -

for anything that resonates in a reading of scripture as it washes over you.

I don't quite remember the context,

but I do remember doing this as a group when I was at Saint John's,

and we were listening to the passage I just read to you

- the Prologue of the Gospel according to John.

A fellow student, when it came time to share what struck us,

surprised me when she kept mentioning things that were not in the words

as they had been read to us - saying things like "logos" and "tabernacled"

Though it was a modern translation being read, she heard the Greek behind it.

I on the other hand had just let myself get irritated by how bad of a translation it was,

how I couldn't find the Greek behind it.

There are layers of understanding much of anything, especially matters of God.

Hearing the same thing, any number of different interpretations can arise

- some more informed than others

- but even informed-ness can fall short of understanding fully.

She heard the nuance of the Greek, I heard the absence of it.

And don't worry - I'll give you a couple of nuggets lost in translation

- but first, just to appreciate those different interpretations.

One style of interpretation, or rather a whole lot of styles tend towards metaphor.

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In general, I'm a fan of this.

Especially spiritualizing things,

seeing patterns that elucidate spiritual experience and the life of faith.

Then there are those that are just fun.

You may know the song "Twas in the Moon of Wintertime"

- it's number 61 in the hymnal -

I made you all sing it once a few years back. But in this hymn,

the story of Jesus' birth gets transposed into the North American world of 16<sup>th</sup> century Native Americans.

He was born in a lodge of broken bark, and swaddled in ragged rabbit skin,

while chiefs from afar knelt, bringing gifts of fox and beaver pelt.

There's nothing new about this impulse to adapt the story to different contexts.

If you've ever wished there was a version of the Gospel in which

Jesus was a warrior king, told as an ancient German epic,

well good news - that exists, and has since about the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

It's the famous Old Saxon poem known as the *Heliand* that does just this.

It is fascinating from the viewpoints of history, literature, and devotion.

But there's something lost in adaptation. -At least a couple of things.

On one hand, sometimes the theology can get a little screwy,

and the symbolism of the original is often forfeit

But on the other, there is also the point of historicity,

of the reality of this birth happening over 2000 years ago

There was certainly a time when I would have been more eager to de-emphasize this.

I thought that the Gospel and all that stuff about Jesus simply worked better as metaphor,

it allowed it to be True without hinging on historical facts,

protecting it's value from being objectively disproven

Today, with these two Gospel readings from Luke and John, I want to reflect with you on

A) the cosmic, transcendent angle, and

B) the mind-boggling reality of it all

So first, let's go back to that passage from John.

John begins at the very beginning of Creation, and states that the Word already was with God

The Word of God - you may be excused for thinking that refers to the Bible,

but in this case it refers to the second person of the Trinity - the Son of God

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And the word for Word is λογος, which has more significance than our word “word.”

λογος in the Greek philosophical traditions referred to  
an ordering principle, a plan, a pattern.

It has connotations of rationality, of logic.

This illuminates further dimensions of Jesus’ birth  
that many early Church Fathers picked up on,  
that today tend to be overlooked.

Remember back in Genesis, when mankind is created?

In the image and likeness of God?

Jesus, millenia before he was born, was the pattern for humanity.

And what does it mean for the pattern to take on flesh and be fully human?

For many early Christians, it meant that humanity was restored.

Something had been broken, or at least damaged, in the Fall, people have this tendency to go bad.

But with the Incarnation, humanity regains its dignity and potential.

St. Irenaeus, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian, was a student of St. Polycarp,

who himself had been a disciple of John, the Gospel-writer himself!

Irenaeus described what John was getting at here as “recapitulation” -

the Greek is *anakephalaiōsis*,

which means putting the head back on, thereby putting back in order.

“The glory of God,” Irenaeus says, “is a man fully alive” (4.20). And that life consists of beholding God. That we might see God, the Father has made himself known to us in his Son, who took on our human nature, was present in this creation, and saved it, that we might participate in the glory of the Father. We are made fully alive in Jesus, who came that he might “vivify those who receive and behold him through faith (4:20).

A century or so later, Saint Athanasius in his work *On the Incarnation*,

(in the 54<sup>th</sup> chapter if you’re curious)

famously summed this up as: “God became Man that Man might become god”

This doesn’t mean of course that you can become the 4<sup>th</sup> person of the Trinity,

but it reflects this idea that Jesus becoming man glorified humanity,

demonstrating that human persons can participate in divinity, even in this life,

because humanity is capable of deep union with God.

In fact in doing so, one become more fully and truly human,

because they are becoming more like the pattern, the λογος, Christ.

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And it's not just humanity.

The whole of creation, the whole of the material universe,  
has a stronger link to divinity, having participated in it in the person of Jesus Christ.

And this was no Plan B.

The Incarnation - that fancy word for the Word becoming flesh,  
was not primarily about Salvation.

Instead it was about God, from the beginning wanting to live among his creation,  
and have communion with them, with us.

Many Church Fathers speculated that even if Adam and Eve  
had successfully rejected the forbidden fruit,  
that Christ would still have become incarnate,  
because that was the plan all along, to join humanity and all creation to Himself.

If all this sounds weird to you, that is okay.

But sometimes it can be helpful to have our expectations expanded,  
our notions of what is possible.

God doesn't force this revitalized life on anyone, but he does offer it freely.

What these ideas depend on to be more than theories  
is that this incarnation did indeed occur.

And this is where Luke's gospel excels.

John is very cosmic level stuff, Luke is more down-to-earth.

... but not one completely divorced from the world of metaphor.

This week, we see Jesus as a young lad getting "lost" and found again in the Jerusalem Temple.

We don't have much information on Jesus as a boy,  
but then we don't have many childhood stories  
of most historical figures from antiquity.

When childhood anecdotes get into the official histories,  
it isn't because the story was of a formative event,  
but rather because it exemplified who that person would become.

If that is what Luke is getting at,

he's likely using this story to reinforce  
Christ's humility in fully accepting the limitations of humanity,  
and his meekness in asking and listening, and even in getting lost.

Moving out to a metaphorical level

perhaps Luke is also telling us that Jesus is someone who might "get lost" or forgotten  
in even religious celebration, (they were there for Passover after all)

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but He's also someone who can again be found  
in returning to the place in which He is worshiped.  
Going into that may have made a pretty good sermon right there,  
but I'll leave that for your own musings.  
Because to juxtapose with John's cosmic and philosophical account,  
Luke's Gospel is far more historically contextualized  
Luke is the Gospel writer most likely to give us the  
"who was ruling where" such that we can figure out the dates involved.  
For at the time, there was no central event from which years were counted.  
The whole way we conceive of universal time was going to come into being,  
around this incarnation that we celebrate each Christmas  
If one compares today's reading from Luke with non-canonical accounts of Jesus' boyhood,  
we find it far less miraculous/physics breaking  
You may have heard of "gnostic gospels" like the Gospel of Thomas and others  
that the church has historically not put much stock in  
In these we get those childhood escapades we so desire.  
In one, the little Jesus lad is helping Joseph with his carpentry  
Joseph it seems forgot to measure twice and cut once,  
because one of his boards was too short.  
Jesus just goes and stretches out the board to the proper length .  
In another tale, he's playing in the mud and shaping birds out of the clay-y soil  
and he claps his hands and they come to life  
But in Luke, Jesus not only obeys the laws of physics, he obeys his parents (at least at the end)  
We see a pious boy who feels at home in the Temple,  
but also one who listens and asks questions  
Highlighting this acceptance of human limitation, focussing on his piety and obedience,  
Luke gives us something very human.  
John gives us something very cosmic.  
Jesus is both - and that gives deeper meaning and possibility to both.  
Jesus - good metaphor, better reality.  
A Renewed and Glorified reality.  
Albeit some assembly required.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*