

December 21, 2011 ADVENT VESPERS

The National Presbyterian Church

Here Comes the Life

John 1:1-4; John 10:7-11

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In our Advent Vesper series, we have been looking together at the coming of our Lord Jesus through the eyes of St. John in his gospel, and in particular in the first chapter of his gospel, John does not tell us about the birth of Jesus, but he certainly tells us about the coming of Jesus and the significance of the coming of Jesus into this world.

- Three weeks ago, Patrick Wilson helped us to think about John's account of John the Baptist, the messenger preparing the way for Jesus to come. Even John the Baptist did not quite understand the significance of the Jesus who came into the world at that time, and that was Patrick's message: that at the very moment when we think we've grasped Jesus, when we think we can put Jesus in our own little cradle and have him all wrapped up nicely, at that very moment we lose the real Jesus. He may become 'our Jesus' but he is not the one who came here on earth, who broke all boundaries, all sense of who he might be, and who could not be encapsulated or captured by anyone or anything. So Patrick told us about the messenger who came to tell people about his coming, and yet also proclaimed that the one who comes is bigger, different, more startling, stunning than anything or anyone you can imagine.
- Two weeks ago, I picked up the series by beginning to focus on different words that we find in the first chapter of John's gospel that speak about this Jesus, who cannot be captured, and even these words don't capture Jesus, they just give us hints of the directions in which we go in order to understand him.
 - So a couple of weeks ago, we thought about **Jesus coming to us as the word of God**. The passage we read in John's gospel begins this way. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word – and here's the stunning one – was God. He was in the beginning with God and then the word becomes flesh, and

dwells among us, and we really still don't know who this word is until John tells us that it's Jesus. So here is this image of the eternal God constantly speaking in the universe, filling the universe, as it were, with sound waves, radio waves, longing to speak to us, the word through which he spoke creation into being: let there be light, and there was light, to speak to you and me, that creative word, longing to do that and coming to us in Jesus, to speak to us as a word at our level, that we could hear, so that our lives could be transformed by the creative, creating, recreating God, Jesus, the focal point, the place where we tune in to the eternal word of God. Here comes the messenger, here comes the word.

- Then last week together, we thought about **Jesus as the light**. John speaks in his first chapter about Jesus as the light, the light that gives life to all people. When we think about light, especially in the context of John's gospel and in the context of the Judaism of Jesus' time, the 1st Century A.D. as well as the 1st Century BC --

Judaism is filled with those images, images of the battle between good and evil. If you happen to read the literature from Qumran ('The Dead Sea Scrolls') you'll see that this is a prominent feature. Many of the scholars of the 19th and 20th Century thought that John's use of the images of light and darkness were Greek imports into a Jewish environment, but one of the great finds from Qumran was the discovery that the images of light and darkness as images of the battle between good and evil were fundamental to the Judaism of Jesus' time.

So when we hear that Jesus comes into the world as the light, immediately our senses should rise and say, "There's a battle going on!" This is an image for goodness against evil and this light, this light doesn't stay away, doesn't leave us in darkness but enters the darkness, enters the battle. And what John tells us is this: that the darkness does not overcome the light.

I spoke about this battle being portrayed in the daily movement back and forth between day and night, as if that was a constant image of the struggle between good and evil -- but keep in mind that even in the darkness the light (the moon and the stars) shines in the heavens! and the darkness does not overcome it!

So as Jesus enters this darkness, the battle is drawn; and he wins, not by the use of human power but by, in a sense, embracing the darkness. Even in that darkest moment when he is on the cross, it's as if he sucks in the darkness into his body, into his life (the opposite, by the way, of Harry Potter's dementors! The dementors

suck the life out of people. Jesus sucks the darkness out of people!) And he says to us, "Give me your darkness, hand it over to me, do not hide it, let me take it. And here's the great exchange: I'll take your darkness, you take my light, and carry it into the world. Yes, you! Me!" But, we say, "I'm too dark for that." So Jesus responds again -- "Take it. Take my light! You are the light of the world, because my light has shone into your heart to give you the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

So here comes the messenger, here comes the word, here comes the light . . .

And this evening we want to think about the life, Jesus as the life. **Here comes the life.**

Word, Light, Life . . . all descriptions, characteristics of this Jesus who comes into the world, portrayed by John in the first chapter of his gospel.

- Here comes the life, in contrast to the universal reign of death. No matter how we fight it, death will come. Whether we fight as individuals, as human beings, or whether we fight it as the whole of the universe, death is on its way. It's cooling off, it's slowing down, it's dying, it will happen, unless something turns it all around.
- Here comes the life that stands in contrast to any life that is mere existence, that is futile existence.
- Here comes the life, someone whose purpose and power and passion is not only to help us live forever, but whose purpose and power and passion is to give us the kind of life that we hope will never end, and that will go on forever.

Now there are some kinds of life that you really don't want to go on forever. It's only when you have the kind of life that you want to go on forever, that you want to go on forever!!

Let me put it like this: sometimes – I know this never happens with you and me – but sometimes you listen to sermons and you say, how long is this going to be? I just can't stand it if it goes on for five more minutes, I wish it were over. You just don't want eternal life at that moment. You want it all to end, 'like now'! But then there are concerts, like when Mike Denham sings, or the choir sings (as on last Sunday evening) where you just feel as if you're caught up in Heaven, you want this to go on and on forever and ever. Or, maybe you're with your family, you're with your friends, you're with somebody you love. You're saying, "my word, look at the time, where did the time go to?" And it's just

disappeared. You've entered, in a sense, eternity, and you don't want that to end for a minute.

That's what Jesus wants to give us, that kind of life which we do not want to end, and he not only can give us that kind of life but he can make sure that it does not end.

- So he both wants to help us live forever, that's everlasting life,
- and he wants to give us that life which has the quality of eternity about it.

Indeed, in the scripture and especially in John's gospel, eternal life means both – both life that lasts forever and life that has the quality of eternity about it, eternal as a description of the quality of the life that God wants to give us. And this is why Jesus comes.

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 things came into being through him [DR: all things came into life through him] and without him, not one thing came into being [DR: not one thing came into life]. What is coming into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, the darkness did not overcome it. And the word became flesh and lived [DR: We saw it] among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-5, 14)

So what John is saying is this, that here is one – in fact, here is the only one, who has the power to break death and the power of death. Here is one, here is the only one, who has the power to bring life out of death in the face of death, and he is entering our world clothed in flesh and blood and we've seen him. We have seen him! "We beheld his glory."

And this is perhaps the most staggering thing: those disciples saw him at his best and at his worst, this Jesus, for two to three years, and yet they still say, of this man who they've seen when he's tired, when he's not at his best, when he's weak, when he's thirsty, they still say, "In him was life." Here is the one who bears the very image and glory of God. And this is why he has the power to bring life, because standing before us, in the flesh, incarnate, is the very embodiment of the Creator, God. He comes to give us life, this one who created us.

It's in John's gospel, perhaps more clearly and persistently than any of the other gospels, that the divinity of Jesus is held high, and it's important to

John that it's held high, that we know that this one who lived among us was the Creator. Precisely because he comes to give us life he must be the Author of Life.

More than just about any other gospel, John focuses on the giving of life as the mission of Jesus. It's repeated again and again through the gospel, who Jesus is and the fact that he wants us to live eternally, everlastingly and thus with a quality of life that we want to last forever. It's not only there in the first chapter,

- It's there in the middle of the gospel, where Jesus is accused of blasphemy because he says, "I and the Father are one, making himself equal with God." (10:30)
- It's there in the gospels through those "I am" statements, two of which we heard in our scripture reading, when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (10:11); when he says, "I am the gate" (10:9); when he says, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (14:6); when he says, "I am the true vine" (15:5); when he says, "I am the bread of life" (6:35) When he says all those statements, "I am," in the Greek there is a reflection of the Hebrew name of God, 'Yahweh,' which means "I am who I am." [Note also: I am the resurrection (11:25); I am the light (8:12)] So these are statements scattered through the gospel in which the early readers would know that they are *implicit declarations of Jesus as the Creator God entering this world.*
- And then it's there at the end of the gospel as well, when Jesus is raised from the dead and has broken the power of death through his resurrection. He comes before his most doubting disciple (apart from Judas who betrays him), 'Doubting Thomas,' and Thomas, who sees him there, bows down before him as no good Jew would ever do to a religious leader, and says to him, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28) –

. . . In flesh and blood, in the midst of the world, the Creator has come, the life-giving Creator God has come, not only to speak his word, not only to shed his light but to overcome death, literally and spiritually, to give us life, literally and spiritually, quantity and quality, now and always.

In John's gospel, we read these verses from Jesus:

"The water that I will give people will become in them a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life" (4:14). "This is indeed the will of my father that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day" (6:39-40). "I give them eternal life and they will never perish" (10:28). "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me though they die yet shall they live" (11:25).

Quite literally, Jesus promises to deliver life everlasting, and by his resurrection confirms that he has the power to do precisely that, but his promise is not just literal, it's not just about death and what happens next, it is spiritual as well; it is the quality of life as well, not just for the future but here and now.

- "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood," says Jesus, "have eternal life (now!). And I will raise them up in the last day (the future!)" (6:40). The future and now, they have it, they possess it, this quality of life.
- "Anyone who hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and has already passed from death to life (5:24)."
- "The thief comes only to steal and kill," we heard earlier. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (10:10)." [While this verse was being read as our Scripture reading earlier, I was actually looking at our windows up here, right at the top of these windows, that's the text which is written up there. You can see it every Sunday, you can see it after the service. "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."

This is what he wants for us, and he can deliver, because he is who he is, the eternal Son of God made flesh, the power to give us life.

This past week, I read a blog by one of our church members who is here this evening, John Bernbaum, who quoted from Cornelius ('Neal') Platinga, the former president of Calvin College, who said this about life

This webbing together of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, fulfillment and delight is what the Hebrew prophets called Shalom. We call it peace, but it means far more than just peace of mind or ceasefire between enemies. In the Bible, Shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight, a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under the arch of God's love. Shalom, in other words, is the way *things* are supposed to be .

<http://www.calvin.edu/about/shalom.html>;

http://reflectionsonshalom.blogspot.com/2011_12_01_archive.html

... Clearly we can substitute that word "things" for the word "life" and get the bigger picture: Shalom, in other words, is the way life is supposed to be. God wants to restore it, renew it, not just out there for someone else in the future, but for you and me: *life abundant, life now, life later, flowing into us by the grace of God, and flowing out from us to a needy world.*

This is what entered the world that first Christmas, this power of life, creative, regenerative life and came face to face with human beings like us. By the spirit, says John in the second part of his gospel (Chs. 14, 15, etc.), God wants to come and live within you and me and within the community

that is called the church, that we might be filled with life now and forever: life that nothing (not even death) can separate us from through all eternity.

The question that John asks all his readers about all of this is always "Do you believe it?"

Do you believe it? Because the first step to receiving it is in fact to believe it, not just in our heads but in our hearts, and in our whole lives.

Do you trust this message, that it is true, because in the trusting something begins to happen, the life will manifest itself differently in different people but it will begin its work at the moment we receive it in faith, or to put it another way, the moment when we, as it were, climb into the cradle with Jesus and put our lives side by side with his, until *his life* takes, carries, our lives on the journey he wants us to pursue.

Let me close with a story, in which a young boy by the name of Meisha finds life through a childlike faith. This story is told by Diana Witts (*Presbyterian Outlook*, Dec.18-25, 2000).

She writes,

"In 1994, two Christians were invited to teach children who had been abandoned, abused and left in the care of a government-run orphanage in Russia. Christmas was near, so the visitors told the traditional story to some 100 boys and girls. Throughout the story, the children and staff sat in amazement. Some sat on the edges of their stools trying to grasp every word. When the story was finished, the children were given materials and invited to make a model of the manger.

When the teachers walked around to see if the children needed any help, one of them reached Meisha, a small boy about 6 years old, and were startled to see not one, but two babies in his model of the manger. The teachers asked the child why.

Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene, Meisha began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy who has only heard the Christmas story once, he related the events accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put Jesus in the manger. Then he said, 'When Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mama and no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him, but I told him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift to give him like everyone else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anyone

ever gave me." So, I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with him always.'

"As Meisha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropping to the table, his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon or abuse him, someone who would stay with him forever.

He found life. He found life – deliverance from a bleak existence. He found what he needed when he pictured himself climbing into that manger with Jesus and attaching his life to his.

In whatever way we can, wherever we are, this is God's invitation to us, who will never fail us or forsake us. How could he? He took the risk of coming to us that first Christmas, and he has not changed since.

Let us bow before God together.

Holy God, we earnestly pray that we would be filled anew with awe and wonder at your amazing coming to us, your amazing advent in Jesus of Nazareth. We ask that you would help us to truly have open hearts and minds and lives and bodies that he might enter us and we might through him hear a word that truly guides us, see a light that truly brightens our darkness, and find a life that is life indeed. Hear our prayer. Amen.

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