

The First Sunday after Christmas

31 December 2017

John 1:1-18

Have you ever stared at a printed page, at a single word, until it loses meaning? I was in second grade, and the word was “Drawer.” I knew perfectly well that it meant a boxy sort of thing that slides in and out of a frame, and you could keep underwear, or kitchen spoons, or pencils and such things in them. But I stared at the page until the letters floated off into space and recombined themselves freely, and I couldn’t think why on earth that particular set of ink blots on a piece of paper should necessarily have to mean that boxy, slidey thing. Why those letters, in that order, for that object?

Why should “d-r-a-w-e-r” mean something to keep socks and carving knives and ballpoint pens in, when “w-e-r-a-r-d” do just as well? Or R-a-w-e-r-d?

I remember several years ago seeing the Kenneth Branagh film version of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. There’s a funny scene late in the play where Katherine, the French princess, asks her maid Alice to teach her some rudimentary English vocabulary. They start with body parts: The head, the neck, the nose, the eyes and so forth. Gradually they work their way down to the leg, the ankle, and at last the foot, which Alice the maid is reluctant to mention to the princess. “F-o-o-t” in English simply means the appendage at the end of one’s leg; in French, “f-o-o-t” is a verb, and not a very genteel one.

Words are funny, slippery, slidey things. As soon as they are spoken or released, they take on a life of their own. How often have you said something—perhaps in a moment of distress or annoyance—only to wish it back immediately? I know I have, and regretted such sayings terribly.

Words can also be instruments of blessing, and enormous potency. Author and blogger Reba Riley tells the story of her own quest to live into an identity conferred on her as a child in the Pentecostal church that she and her family attended at the time. A visiting evangelist called her forward from the congregation and declared that she, Reba, then an elementary school aged child, would be a source of blessing for many people around the world. The blessing came true years later, but only after a convoluted, challenging, and life-giving journey that she narrates in her book, *Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome: A Memoir of Humor and Healing*.

Throughout the Bible we hear of God, and the prophets, and the people of God, speaking words that have power to make things happen. The Second Song of Isaiah, one of the canticles we sometimes use at Morning Prayer, declares: “As rain and snow fall from the heavens, and return not again, but water the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is my word (says God) that goes forth from my mouth: It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I have purposed, and prosper in that for which I sent it.” The words accomplish and effect reality.

This morning, the gospel reading declares: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God...” the towering opening lines of the prologue of the gospel according to John.

These words are reminiscent (and deliberately so) of another story about beginnings: Genesis 1: “In the beginning, God created...” The author has something to say about “In the beginning” before time had begun, before anything existed—there was the Word. In Greek, “Logos.” The active, potent, creating Energy that brought forth all that is.

Which, the author of John's gospel tells us, has now come to be present, and seen, and known in the person of Jesus the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ.

Today (and indeed every Sunday of the year, but today especially) we commemorate the Incarnation—the belief that God in Christ became not only the creator of all things, but part of all things. “For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Or better, became truly human, in every aspect.

When we say that Jesus was “without sin” I don't think that means that he never said anything he later regretted, or never had impure thoughts, or any of the other things that we imagine sin to be. The scriptures tell us that Jesus got angry, and backtalked his mama, and lost his temper sometimes. That he hung out with all kinds of people, even the riff-raff and those of dubious reputation. That he drank, and loved a good party, even to excess.

I think what we mean by saying that Jesus was “without sin” is that he never was disconnected from the Logos, from the creative, regenerating, original Energy of the universe. Even in the moments of questioning and doubt, even on the cross itself at the moment of his death, Jesus was never separated from the Source. (Now he may have not always felt connected to the Source, but that doesn't mean he wasn't. Feelings are slippery, slidey things...they can change very quickly.)

To point to Jesus as the chosen one, the Messiah, the Christ, the Logos in human form, is to claim something utterly amazing and transforming for all of life, two thousand years ago in Palestine and this very morning in Norman, Oklahoma.

Several years ago, CBS aired a weeknight drama entitled called *Joan of Arcadia*. The central character, Joan, is an ordinary high school student who suddenly begins receiving visits and messages from God—who is never the same twice, who appears in the guise of the schoolbus driver one moment, then as a homeless person on the street later in the same episode, and still again as a crazy cat lady soon thereafter. The messages God brings are often challenging, and not always clear—and often the conflict which followed in the episode was a complication of Joan's only partially listening, or imagining that she knew exactly what the message intended. Sometimes words are slippery, slidey things...we have to listen carefully.

The theme song of the show at the opening of each episode was titled “One of Us”.

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus
trying to make his way home?*

In a moment we'll say words together about Jesus, “incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” In our eucharistic prayer today we'll give thanks for God's self-disclosure “in creation, in the calling of Israel to be [God's] people, in the word spoken through the prophets...” and in coming to us, in bread and wine and the face of our brothers and sisters in faith, and in the face of strangers and unexpected visitors as well. Guests at the dinner table, unknown and yet bringing Christ with them as well.

A traditional Gaelic Rune (poem) of Hospitality...

*I saw a stranger yestreen (yesterday):
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place:*

*And in the sacred name of the Triune [God]
He blessed myself and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones.
And the lark said in her song
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise,
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.*