

Another View of Christmas

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I want to show you two views, two photographs, of Christmas. One photograph is suggested by the familiar line from Luke's Gospel, "And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger." If we had a photograph of this view, we'd see a stable and in the stable, Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus surrounded by kneeling shepherds. One bright star hovering over the stable illuminates the scene. We're most familiar with this view of Christmas. We've heard the story all our lives. We like it best. Call this the close-up view of Christmas.

~~But~~ But there's another view of Christmas pictured in the New Testament. The other view is suggested by the lofty and ethereal words of Saint John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.... And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." We see this alternative view of Christmas again in our Epistle lesson. "In these last days", the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, "(God) has spoken to us by a Son... through whom he also created the worlds." Call this view of Christmas, the cosmic view.

It's more difficult to picture the cosmic view of Christmas but let's try. Imagine a Christmas card showing whirling galaxies, spinning spiral nebulae, and distant suns circled by mysterious and unknown planets. Or remember the photographs that appeared in the news last year, photographs taken by the Hubble Space telescope showing stars being born within a distant nebula light years away? Or picture the artist, Vincent Van Gogh's, famous painting, "Starry Night". Van Gogh uses vivid colors and heavy, swirling brush strokes to paint the universe with its galaxies. That's how I picture the other view of Christmas described by John in our Gospel lesson, the cosmic view of Christmas.

St. John and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tell us ~~that the birth of Jesus reveals the power at the heart of the~~ universe. Behind and above and at the center of our mysterious universe is the One who came to us in Jesus Christ, God's Son. "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

Several years ago I read an article in National Geographic Magazine entitled -- *The Once and Future Universe*. The article made an incredible claim, a claim every bit as incredible as the Christian claim that Jesus was God's son, through whom the universe was created. The article claimed that 20 billion years ago, everything in the universe - the sun, moon, planets as well as all the stars and distant galaxies - all things visible and invisible - were compressed into a space smaller than the nucleus of an atom. Can you imagine that? According to this theory, the universe began as the result of an explosion, called the big

bang. Out of this expanding universe our galaxy and solar system were eventually formed.

St. John proclaims, and Christians in every age have believed, that before the Big Bang banged, at the very beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him. In the beginning the Word broke through the unimaginable silence of space - a creating word, a word that stirs life and is life because it's God's word (Buechner). John asks us to believe that the Word that became flesh in the birth of Jesus Christ is the primal Word and the final Word and that word is love.

There's a wonderful scene in Norman McCleans book, A River Runs Through It. A father, a Presbyterian minister, and his two sons, are resting from fly fishing the Big Blackfoot River in Western Montana. "What have you been reading?" one of his son's asks. "A book," his father says. "A good book. In the part I was reading it says the Word was in the beginning, and that's right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you'll hear that the words are underneath the water." His son responds: "That's because you're a preacher first and then a fisherman. If you ask Paul, he'll tell you that the words are formed out of water." "No," my father said, "you're not listening carefully. The water runs over the words."

Which came first the water or the Word? the world or the Word? The Christian faith proclaims that the universe and our lives do not emerge out of meaningless chaos. Behind the world

is the Word and the Word is the Word of a loving Father full of grace and truth.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us. That's the meaning of Christmas. God refused to float in sublime isolation above time and space, but became in Jesus Christ, flesh and blood. Jesus is the human face of God. God is Christlike. God doesn't just reveal things about himself. God reveals *himself* in Jesus Christ. Christmas means that you and I don't have to try to climb up to God. Christmas means that God became like us. God was born in a Bethlehem stable on that first Christmas. God experienced homelessness and befriends the homeless. We believe in Jesus Christ, fully God, fully man. In Jesus Christ we see God preaching good news to the poor, healing the sick, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. God became a human being so that we might enter into a relationship and fellowship with God, through Jesus Christ. What Christmas means has never been better expressed than in a great poem by Richard Crashaw:

Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer in winter, Day in night.
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one! whose all embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav'n to earth.

Let us pray: God Most High, your only Son embraced the weakness of flesh, to give us power to become your children; your eternal Word chose a dwelling among us, that we might live in your presence. Grant us a spirit of wisdom to know how rich is the glory you have made our own, and how great the hope to which we are called in Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendor of eternal light, God forever and ever. Amen.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Great God of power,
we praise you for Jesus Christ,
who came to save us from our sins.
We thank you for the hope of the prophets,
the song of the angels,
and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.
We thank you that in Jesus you became flesh and lived among us,
sharing human hurts and pleasures.
Glory to you for your grace-filled love.
Glory to you, eternal God;
through Jesus Christ, Lord of lords,
and King of kings,
now and forever. Amen.