

Jesus is born: Wonder and Mystery!
Luke 2:1-20

The Rev. Kathleen Hawkins Berkowe

Well we are finally here! Its Christmas Eve ! Christ is born! And here we are at the foot of the crèche looking at the baby Jesus in adoration!

We've been rushing up to this moment for the last month; since Thanksgiving, really. There's the whole rush in business to finish out the year for accounting purposes. Corporate transactions have to be completed. Expense reports have to be submitted. Even Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to register for tax reasons! Students feel the pressure of the end of the semester. And there are preparations for Christmas;:buying gifts, preparing food, travel, entertaining. And it is the season for helping people as well. Our teens went on a midnight run to take food and clothing to people living on the streets of Manhattan. A few weeks ago our parishes put on a Christmas show that attracted hundreds of people! And our parish joined with Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church a beautiful and inspiring concert. The whole season is full of activity.

But also, since the Sunday after Thanksgiving, we have celebrated Advent, the Church season of waiting and watching. All of the time of Advent is spent waiting for this moment: Christmas, the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem! We have heard the story so many times, and we repeat it every year.

And every year we are struck with wonder and mystery. On the one hand we have this very homey story of a humble birth to a young woman betrothed to an older man. But on the other hand – this is the story of Eternity. For Jesus is both fully human and fully Divine. When Jesus is born, God breaks into our time, our homey, material existence. God breaks into Creation once- and for all time- for all eternity. And because God, through His Son, has become one of us, we are able, in turn, to glimpse the Eternal. We have a spiritual life. And we can have Eternal life.

And we live this way, with one foot in material reality, in Creation, and the other foot in the Spiritual reality of our Eternal life in God. These are not two different realities but two “levels” or “views” of the same reality. Luke’s Gospel ties together these two “levels” of the same reality. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson makes this point, and I am indebted to him for this insight.

Luke’s Gospel does what the Church does in the season of Advent. It puts the Christmas story in the perspective of spiritual reality. Luke’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus as part of the spiritual story of mankind: from Creation and Adam and Eve to the temptation in the Garden of Eden by the serpent, to their being thrown out of the garden for wanting basically to substitute themselves for God. (Something that many of us suffer from!)

Earlier in Luke’s Gospel we have heard the story of Israel, a people set apart to receive the gift of the Law through Moses. We have heard about the kings, and their power grabs, and their turning away from God and the Law.. And we have heard about the prophets who time and again called Israel to return to Scripture, and to live in accordance with the Law. We have heard about Israel’s defeats at the hands of enemies, regaining the kingdom under David for awhile and being defeated again. And always there is the idea that a Savior would come, a Messiah. Luke, writing several generations after Jesus to the early Church, points out how how Jesus’ birth, life and death fulfill the Scriptures. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one.

When Luke tells the story of Jesus’ Birth, he slows down. Luke tells us the story in loving detail, stressing the material, the ordinary. From Luke, we get the grittiness of the stable, the baby laid in a manger, on the hay, where the oxen put their heads to eat! And it is in the middle of sheep country. From Luke we hear about taxes and registration and bureaucracy.

Luke tells us the story from the Eternal perspective as well. Angels, heavenly messengers who see God face to face,- suddenly appear – in glory --- and call nearby shepherds to come see the miracle! They sing heavenly music! And then they are gone. So the shepherds go to see – and witness this miracle.

Here, in the face of Jesus, time and Eternity, humanity and God, earthly and heavenly, intersect. Tonight we celebrate a truth that is, was and ever shall be

The Rev. Kathleen Hawkins Berkowe
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– for eternity. Jesus came into our world once – for all time- and connects each of us to God in eternity. It is a mystery. It is reality!

And so, we live with one foot in this material reality – in Creation, where we eat, sleep, make a living, have deadlines, do Christmas shopping, help others, love one another and try to make the world a better place. And we live with the other foot in Eternity, sharing the spirit of God known to us in the face of Jesus Christ.

Tonight after the Eucharist, the Church will go dark. We will hear a second Gospel – from John, “In the beginning was the Word....” Here the author uses the Greek word “Logos,” translated as “word.” But Loos means also Divine reason or plan, and wisdom, both physical and ethical. “For the Logos was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

This Gospel of John will be read by candlelight. And from the light used to read the Scripture, the acolytes will light our candles, spreading the light of Christ. As we hold our candles, and sing “Silent Night,” a song of adoration of our Lord, let us rest in the wonder and mystery of God’s love for us.

“For the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. And we have seen His glory....”

Alleluia!
Amen.