

December 25, Christmas Day: John 1:1-14

We don't need to explain logos theology; we need to bear witness to Jesus coming into our world.

November 29, 2016

The Fourth Gospel begins with a prologue that is quite complex—and quite unlike anything known to the other three. Interpreting it for Christmas Day worshipers requires nothing short of a reset button, if one hopes to be heard with profit. These worshipers are restless; often their attention spans allow them to grapple for just a little while with the new, the now, and the next, to say nothing of the complex. The mere mention on Christmas Day of a “word becoming flesh” is likely to cause people to wander off into the wild, blue yonder. To wade in too deeply with exegetical expertise may well reduce a preacher’s words to irrelevance—especially in the holiday season, when even the most ardent Christians still have many unchecked items on their to-do list.

Yet this passage is such an important one for contemporary listeners. And it is a preacher’s responsibility to reach some kind of a “so what” moment from John’s prologue, from grappling with this in-breaking activity on the part of God.

The prologue forms a hymn dedicated to a heavenly being who became human on our behalf. Its opening words bear witness to the life of God in Jesus and the oneness of the Word with God. This is our story—this Word who is Jesus has been sent by God into our world—and Christmas is a time for us to reaffirm its promise and hope in our lives. This story at the heart of our faith must be constantly reaffirmed.

For after all, it is not a story without opposition—in John’s day or ours. There are countless other voices making truth claims about how best to live a life filled with meaning and purpose, in obedience to a higher power. John recognizes this opposition to the Word that is Jesus Christ, and he calls on us to stake a claim and bear witness to the truth that it is indeed God who has sent Jesus into our world. In fact, the Fourth Gospel is filled with parallels and juxtapositions calling on us to take sides, to witness, to stand and be counted as believing that God has acted in a

unique way on our behalf. In the prologue light and darkness are front and center, but throughout John many other oppositions exist as well: good and evil, truth and falsehood, death and life, them and us, insiders and outsiders.

This Jesus, identified by John as the *logos*, is the light that shines in darkness. As hopeful as such a declaration sounds, there is a tone of opposition here between the light and the darkness. Though the darkness does not overcome the light, it is also the case that the world does not know him and his own do not accept him. What is needed, then and now, is a witness: someone to bear witness to the truth of who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

After all, every discovery of reality awaits the willingness of a witness to share what that witness has seen and heard. So it is here in the prologue that we are introduced to the glory of the eternal Word—standing in juxtaposition to the simple witness of a mortal prophet. Herein lies John the Baptist's importance to the coming of Jesus into the world. Though any number of scholars believe the mention of John in the prologue stems from a later hand, he nonetheless bears witness to the redemptive drama unfolding before us.

All about this hymn there is the scent of witness. Its witness to the presence of Christ is focused primarily beyond the created world of time and space. But with the coming of John, the understanding of witness moves explicitly into the realm of human history. John's specific purpose for being in the world is to bear witness to Jesus. In the synoptic tradition John the Baptist introduces Jesus; in the Fourth Gospel his sole function is to act as a witness.

John's witness serves the same purpose as the Fourth Gospel itself: that all might believe through him. To believe through John is to receive his witness as true. And throughout the Gospel, to believe truly in Jesus is not simply to give assent to information about him. It entails a person's total allegiance to and wholehearted trust in Jesus. I wonder if it is too much for us to say to one another and to all we meet during the holiday season: *Yes, I know him. He is the one sent from God, and he can indeed transform your life.*

Maybe the most pertinent question before us is not unfolding the complexities of logos theology, but rather understanding what it means to bear witness to the coming of Jesus into our world. What's needed on a day like Christmas—or, maybe more importantly, what can be heard and received on such a day—is some

understanding of the testimony of a witness. What is needed is a timely nod of assent that with the appearance of John the Baptist, God's story has moved from the cosmic and the eternal to a specific time and place within the arena of human history. A prophet named John has been sent from God as a human delegate on a purely human mission, that of bearing testimony to someone greater than himself.

In a way, John's witness makes our witness possible. It emboldens us: we too can bear witness to the truth of the Christ child among us.