

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, I will tell you that this Sunday is a very strange day to preach in. It is the Second Sunday after Christmas, according to the church's calendar. But on our secular calendar...the one we all use from day to day, it is January 3....in the year 2016.

Hello! We are well into the New Year...and the Epiphany is coming this week. But we are still stuck in Christmas.

At home we are in a time warp of sorts as well. Sure, Meribeth and I know that it is 2016. Somehow we got past all the college bowl games the past several days by getting away for a short holiday. Even though we did not watch them, we knew about them...just like we knew about the big ball dropping in Times Square, and all that. But the tree is still up in our house, along with the Christmas cards, and so on. It is strange, for sure.

And, as today goes, the lectionary of the church does not help. Sure, we have already heard the gospel reading appointed for today. But unless you did some study to prepare for today, you would not otherwise know that there are three...not one, but three gospel readings appointed for today. Besides the one that we have heard, there is also the story of the wise men coming through Jerusalem on their way to see the baby Jesus and their encounter with him and return by another route. And the other gospel story appointed for today has Jesus as a young boy, going off and getting lost from his parents, who become frantic with worry and ultimately find him in the temple, with his rather smug reply to the effect that they should have known that they would find him there...in the home of his father.

It is as if, in the rush toward the Epiphany this week, the church hopes to cram everything in this Sunday...to give the greatest flexibility for the consideration of the Word of God before moving on in the calendar...like the rest of the world in 2016. And, it initially left me with a sense of wandering around lost...like Mary and Joseph looking for their child. What does the Holy Spirit ask me to do with this?

And, then, I thought about last week's message...following the great opening gospel reading from John, proclaiming that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Proclaiming that the spirit of Jesus was the Word, and part of God from even before "Day 1".

The connection? If you were here, you may remember the reflection that, in the largest sense beyond our conception, either individually or collectively as a species across all time, God has a story to tell. That story is focused, within our theological understanding, upon the person and spirit of Jesus..then, now and forever yet to come. But it is a story that unfolds throughout all time with the unveiling of God's creation, and is expanded and understood billions and billions of different ways with the birth of a new human, at any time and any place upon this planet.

On the surface of it, today's gospel reading is simply Matthew's attempt to verify the authenticity, if you will, of who Jesus was and is. This story merely is a factual backup for the prophesy long before foretold about the Messiah...Jesus goes to Egypt, and then comes from Nazareth. It seems pretty straight forward, and is harmless enough.

But it is necessary verification, nonetheless, from the earliest repeaters and later writers of the gospels of Jesus in order to lay a claim of authority for the life story that was to follow, ultimately crystalized into the unbelievable claim that, once crucified, he rose from the dead.

A body that rose from the dead.

And that is the key to the whole story as we know it.

Otherwise, for Christians, what is the big fuss? Who would otherwise care about the birthdate of a baby boy born in a manger so long ago? If not for the progression of the story in these gospels, really, who would make a fuss about Christmas really meaning more than a jolly elf down the chimney as being important for children, with all the shopping and gift giving that follows all that?

Days ago, we gathered in this place to celebrate the Savior's birth. The Baby Jesus was precious as he slept in that manger bed, and our hearts rejoiced when we sang "The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." We are still celebrating Christmas...still singing carols and basking in the glow of the Savior's birth, but Mary and Joseph are fleeing Bethlehem to protect their young son. We are still in awe of this baby, but the principalities and powers of this world are threatened by him and want to destroy him.

It is hard to hear this sort of news while we are still in the Season of Christmas because we are tired of seeing the pictures of suffering and hearing the stories of pain. But in the rush of the world to get on with 2016, we can still wait a bit...because even if we think we cannot give more of ourselves, or care anymore for the world around us, or cry any longer for those suffering amongst us, the truth is that there is more.

There is...because the Jesus who was born in a manger, and belittled by the religious purists, and hated by his adversaries, and abandoned by his friends; this Jesus came to prove that ultimately love wins over evil. And apparently there was no other way to show this, except by the life he lived, and the life he gave. There is always more coming from God the Father, who longs for each of us to hear, and live into the story that God has to tell through Jesus.

So, for me, Christmas is still here...because it is always a good and right and joyful thing, always and everywhere to go out into a world that is also weary and tell them that there is hope. That a cold, dark January will eventually give way to spring...that the birth of the Baby in Bethlehem was not the end of the story...it was just the beginning. What is the rush to leave Christmas?

The Epiphany will come soon enough. But, for the moment, let us continue to celebrate and rejoice in the wonder and miracle of the Christ Mass..the continuation of God's story in actually having God come to be with us. It will take more than twelve days to ponder that blessing, within the loving embrace of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.