

The twelve days of Christmas are nearly at end. It is the twelfth day of Christmas... tomorrow is Epiphany and after that if we don't put away our pipers piping and maids-a-milking, we're no longer exercising the liturgical seasons, we're just slack. Mind you, I'm not judging, but the liturgical excuse is gone. For this brief season every year, we have a quick immersion in the story of the incarnation. We're briefly plunged into the story of Mary and Joseph and the donkey, the census, innkeepers, shepherds and magi. Then, so quickly, in twelve days, to be exact, it passes for another year.

For Christians seeking a deeper meaning in this season, it seems at times that we may have to dig very deep indeed to sift through the layers of holiday debris separating us from the incarnation. I wonder sometimes, if by and large, our cultural celebrations of Christmas suggest we worship not the incarnate God, but rather at the temple of family, food, fellowship, and in our worse moments, commercialism and consumerism. The nature of our celebrations, the confusion around what exactly is their object, has the potential to present a problem for Christians.

Were our whole observance tied to the myriad ways in which we celebrate: the food, the conviviality and the giving of gifts, then our tidings are not necessarily that of comfort and joy. At our best, we may have tidings of generosity and epicurean delight, at our worst, tidings of heartburn and credit card bills. Indeed, divorced from the incarnation of God, our tidings are not of comfort and joy.

If we are to carry forward the season - the work and presence of God among us, we must turn our attention to the incarnation of God.

To turn ourselves to the incarnation is to seek to understand the nature of God's presence and God's very own self through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The story of Jesus is the story of God's revealing God's self to us. It is the story of God being with us. We encounter an explanation of that presence in the Gospel narratives, most commonly in Luke, who tells a happy tale with shepherds and angels, but also in Matthew who tells a darker tale with kings and tyrants. Both tell us of the birth of Jesus. But John's Gospel gives us a complimentary witness. John is a theologian, and John tells us about God.

I am a theologian. So are you. Everyone who has the slightest interest or image of the divine is a theologian. We may be good theologians, we may be bad theologians, we can be Christian theologians or we can be non-Christian theologians, but if we have any feelings about God whatsoever, then we have engaged in the doing of theology.

But here's the rub about doing theology: unless we simply want to be at the mercy of believing everything we feel, the theologian has to identify the basis for what he or she believes.

We must identify what the foundations of our belief system are in order to live with the conclusions that we draw. If you studied classical reasoning in school you know the basic claim: one must state the premises used to draw any conclusion, otherwise the validity of the conclusion is in doubt. The same applies to theologians. Whatever theological claims we make must have some foundation. That is why we turn to John. John writes of the meaning of the incarnation.

For Christians, the foundation of our theology is revelation. By revelation, I refer not to the last book of the Bible, Revelation with a capital R, but rather, the claim that God has

revealed God's own self in a unique way that is the basis for all our theological claims. For Christian theologians of every stripe, that revelation is Jesus Christ.

And so if we want to seek our answer to questions posed by Christmas from the vantage point of faith, we must do so in the person of Jesus Christ. That means that if we are going to claim a faith basis for our actions and attitudes in life, then we have to pay attention to what that revelation says. That means that we cannot at Christmas or any other time rest only in the knowledge of the Baby Jesus without paying attention to what the adult Jesus said and did.

If you've seen the movie *Talladega Nights*, you know what a faith only in the sweet baby Jesus yields.

It may seem odd that with such a pantheon of luminaries at my disposal as John Calvin and Karl Barth that I would use as illustrative material a fictitious rogue race-car driver who wants to go fast, but if we want a faith that will enable us to face the issues of life, we can't have the cradle without the cross. If you ask a reformed theologian to give answer to the deeper questions of life, that answer begins, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

John's theology tells us that not one thing came into being without God. From the start of it all, the whole thing has been wrapped up in God's sustaining, creating care. There is not a moment, not a second, where creation wasn't or isn't carried in God's very own being. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

We cannot take meaning from the cradle or the cross if we remove either from the context of God's all sustaining care. The point of the cradle isn't the cute baby Jesus, it is

God's presence with us, not rejecting us for sin but choosing to walk beside us and inviting us into full communion. The point of the cross is that God's grace is never cheap, it is costly and that living the way God calls us to live comes with implications and may indeed come with some cost. The point of the cradle is that there is no length to which God has not gone for the love of humankind. The point of the cross is that there is no limit to God's love.

And in between, Jesus taught us how to live. This is where incarnational theology gives answer to our question: if your defining characteristic of what it means to celebrate Christmas is to follow Jesus, to live a life in reliance upon Christ, then we must follow his teachings. To make a declaration that we follow Jesus Christ, and that is the declaration that Christians make, we must live like we know him!

The way that we live like we know Jesus is by seeking what Eugene Peterson called, "a long obedience in the same direction." That means as we worship at the cradle, we must always remember that the cross stands in the background and that the ministry of Jesus called women and men to lives given in witness to the very God become incarnate. That means not just knowing Jesus' teachings, but living by them.

What did Jesus chiefly teach? In John's Gospel account, it is that we might have life and have it abundantly. Over and over in the pages of the Gospel narratives, when asked what we needed to do to live faithfully, Jesus responded with an old creed of Judaism: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your mind and, do this too: love your neighbor as yourself. This is the stuff of which the abundant life is made.

The heart of the life lived faithfully to the incarnation is love. Our calling in response to the cradle and the cross is to loved as we have been loved.

Many of you know Leo Tolstoy's story of Martin the Cobbler. It is a pretty simple story, it gets retold around Christmastime quite a bit, and well, it is as much an example of incarnational theology as I can remember. The premise is quite simple. A widowed, aged shoemaker, mourning the loss of his only child is converted by a passing monk and reads the gospel. Late at night he hears a voice telling him, "I will come to you tomorrow." And so, In light of his faith, he spends his day seeking and expecting Christ. As the day wears on, Tolstoy recounts the visitors Martin receives and they follow a predictable pattern: first someone in need of shelter and companionship, then someone in need of food and warmth, finally one in need of instruction and forgiveness.

Being an object lesson, you may well imagine that the answer lies in the lesson: at the end of the day, Martin has seen no Christ, but as he fitfully sleeps, the faces of his day replay themselves with the question, "didn't you recognize me?"

It's a good object lesson as object lesson's go, but the reason I retell it once more is so that I can come around to Tolstoy's original title for the story: Where Love Is, God Is. And so that is my answer to the problems posed by Christmas, to reply simply on the incarnational theology that where love is, God is. And its converse, where God is, love is. And so as we come to the table today, this table that remembers Christ's dying and rising, we remember as well that there is no cradle without the cross and there is no cross without the cradle, because where God is, love is. And where love is, God is. And those indeed are tidings of comfort and joy.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.