

The angels have gone back into heaven, the shepherds have returned to their flocks, the Friendly Beasts who sang to the newborn babe on Christmas Eve have put away their songs, ears, feathers and cloaks. We are not in Bethlehem any more, but it is still Christmas. For another whole week, we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. We will return to Bethlehem next Sunday, on the Feast of the Epiphany, when wise men will arrive, having followed a star from the east. But this morning, we are about telling the mystery of the Incarnate One, God come into God's own creation as one of us, in a different mode.

Moving from the manger in Bethlehem to the Prologue of the Gospel according to John is like a shift from hearing a carol or a folk song, to hearing a cantata or an oratorio. We are on a grander scale here in the opening of the Gospel according to John. We have been swept up into the realm of the cosmos and given an immediate and powerful sense of how huge is the meaning of the story we are about to hear. We have never heard and will never hear anything else so important or so transporting in all our life, John seems to say.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, of course, convey the same meaning, only in a different way. Like John, they, too, begin with the origins of the Incarnate One who came into the world, Son of God and Son of Man. But in Matthew and Luke, his origin is miraculous conception, a child from the Holy Spirit born of Mary. He is rooted in the history of Israel, and God's creation of humankind. The Gospel of Matthew traces his lineage from King David and back to Abraham, the father of the faith, where Israel began (1:1). Luke also traces his lineage through the house of David, but even farther back, to creation itself. Luke names Jesus son of Adam and son of God, the Creator (3:38).

The song John sings in the Prologue, though, takes us back, not to a visit by an angel to a young first century woman or her betrothed, not through the history of Israel or even the dawn of creation, but all the way back to the very beginning, *before time, before creation, before anything was that came to be. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

*“In the beginning God . . .”* is how the book of Genesis begins, of course, and John intends for us to hear the echo of those opening words in his own. The coming of the Word into the world is a *new* beginning for humankind, in relation to God and to each other. The Word (*logos* in the Greek) is the purpose, the life-giving, self-giving intention of God. The *Logos/Word* is the meaning, purpose and intention at the heart of the cosmos, and the communication of that purpose and intention.

In the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, God has done a new thing:

Invisible in his own nature, he became visible in ours. Beyond our grasp, he chose to come within our grasp. Existing before time began, he began to exist at a moment in time. Incapable of suffering as God, he did not refuse to be a man, capable of suffering. Immortal, he chose to be subject to the laws of death.

(Leo the Great (d. 461), quoted in Synthesis, 12/30/01, p. 1)

*In him was life*: life breathed into Adam at creation; life breathed into dry bones in the valley of Ezekiel’s vision; life that called forth Lazarus from the tomb; life in which we share as a community of his disciples.

*And the life was the light of all people*. We know the light of the created world: the sun that gives warmth, life, health, growth, abundant crops, flowers, fruit. The light of the dawn that brings hope and new possibilities after the darkness of night. The light of understanding and clarity. The light that guides us on our way, like the pillar of fire in the Book of Exodus that led the people of Israel in the wilderness at night; like the Word of God that is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105).

Jesus says of himself in John that he is the light of the world, and those who follow him “will never walk in darkness” (8:12; 12:35-36). He is the light that cuts through the darkness, that in its brightness and clarity reveals the way of following after him, and also exposes the depth and danger of the darkness.

In John, the darkness is that which resists the light—resists life, abundance, goodness, love, clarity and understanding—and tries to destroy it. In the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos recounts a vision of a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more darkness, no more crying, no more dying. He tells of the new Jerusalem that “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is [Jesus] the Lamb (Rev. 21:23).

But in the world into which Jesus came and in which we ourselves live, the darkness was and is still with us. We know the darkness of prejudice and hatred that dims human sight, blinding us to the humanity of those not of our tribe, our religion, our culture. We know of darkness filled with fear, menace, and evil intent. We have seen the darkness of injustice and oppression, and lives without hope. We have seen and met the darkness of depression and despair, of minds beclouded by grief, or by illness of body and spirit.

There is also the darkness of much of the news, on the front page and inside, on television and radio: news of corruption and scandals, news of war, of soldiers and civilians killed and injured, houses and whole cities bombarded and torn apart, and now, news of an assassination in Pakistan. “*Bhutto Assassination Sparks Chaos*,” shouted the banner headline in Friday’s Washington Post. (Dec. 28, 2007) “Chaos,” as if the events in Pakistan might return that country, and beyond, to the formless void (Heb., *tohu wabohu*) and darkness that covered the earth before the first day of creation (Gen. 1:1-5), before God spoke creation into being and order, and declared it good.

In October, 1939, as World War II was beginning, C. S. Lewis pointed out that war—and we may say, also, political assassination—terrible as it is, does not create a new situation: “It simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it,” Lewis said. (Talk at Oxford University, quoted by Isabel Anders, ed., in Synthesis, December 30, 2001, p. 4) The human situation in which we are often surrounded by darkness, or even spewing out some darkness of our own.

As New York Times columnist David Brooks observed, ours too often is “a world where you’re given no good alternatives.” (“The News Hour with Jim Lehrer,” 12/28/07) Ours is still a world in which the darkness goes on striving to overcome the light, where it is hard to see how our leaders, or

leaders anywhere, might steer a course to safety and peace with justice. Ours is still a world to which the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel hold out hope: "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*"

Again and again in this life we have the occasion to choose—ours may not be a choice that could alter the course of history, but ours *is* to choose how we will live our life. Will we choose to live in the darkness of fear and despair? Or will we, rather, choose to embrace life, as did the Incarnate Word, to trust the light and live in his way of self-giving love?

There is darkness, and there is darkness. There is the darkness that stifles and tries to snuff out the light; and there is darkness that anticipates and prepares for the light's return. This is the darkness of the earth in which seeds wait to germinate and bulbs rest before bringing forth new shoots. It is the darkness of sleep, darkness that brings healing, darkness illuminated by the grace of visions and dreams. It is the night that "heralds the dawn, new joys, new possibilities" (New Zealand Prayer Book, p.184 ). It is the darkness of the waiting and unknowing in the grave on Holy Saturday.

Whenever, wherever, however evidence may appear to the contrary, God goes on turning even the shadow of death into the morning (BCP, 99). In the mystery of the Incarnate One, God's only Son, it is the darkness, even the darkness of betrayal and death, that is overcome, by the light.