How appropriate that we read this lesson that begins the Gospel of John on the first Sunday after Christmas. This quieter time gives us a chance to reflect on the meaning of the prophecy fulfilled in Jesus’ birth. To hear these words leads us into that time of reflection.

It’s interesting to consider the step from the much beloved lesson of the birth from the Gospel of Luke to the words that begin the Gospel of John, *in the beginning*. One might consider the movement to be from the concrete, from the real, from a story with people, and with places we can find on a map, to the more mystical, to a description of Jesus as the Christ, the Logos, the Word, present from before creation becoming human in Jesus.

In reality, however, there is very little historical fact available about the birth of Jesus. Just a couple of years before year 1, of the Christian Era, there was a confluence of stars and planets that may have appeared from the Holy Land to be a very bright star, that may have been the star leading the wise men.

We know that there was no census in year 1, that a member of the house of David would not have gone to Bethlehem to be enrolled. This doesn’t mean that Jesus wasn’t born just as the Gospel tells us. It doesn’t mean that stories handed down in great detail in the oral tradition didn’t hold truth. It doesn’t mean that the story of the Gospel of Luke isn’t important to our lives today, holding truths of great depth and significance. But it leaves the event more open to question than we might like to believe.

And so, possibly, the movement from the story of Jesus’ birth to the words of the Gospel of John: *In the beginning was the Word,...* is actually the movement from the unknown to the known, from uncertainty to reality.

*In the beginning was the Word.* John uses the same language that we find in Genesis—In the beginning…The Word is logos, a Greek word that means “word” or “reason”. In John’s use it refers to second person of the Trinity, but in that culture it was a word of both pagan and Jewish meaning. There was a common understanding of its meaning in the culture of that time. *Logos* was universal reason that governed and permeated the world.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God’s word was more than language, more than the way God communicated with humans. The Word had creative power. We hear in Genesis 1:3 God said *let there be light* and there was light. In Psalm 33, v. 6: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth.* By the time of the Prophets the Word of the Lord was regarded as having an almost independent voice. In the Book of Samuel (15:10) we read in the description of the call of Samuel: *And the word of the Lord came to Samuel.*

And in the beautiful words from the Book of Isaiah, 55:10ff:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,*

_And do not return there until they have watered the earth,*
Making it bring forth and sprout,
Giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
It shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose
And succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In Hellenistic Judaism the concept of the Logos was further developed as an independent reality associated with Wisdom. We hear in the Song of Solomon (Apocrypha) 9.1-2: O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy who have made all things by your word, and by your wisdom have formed humankind...give me the wisdom that sits by your throne, and do not reject me from among your servants.

In Christian Scripture, the concept of the Word is only found in Johannine writings: the Gospel of John, Letters of John, Revelation to John. The identification of Logos with the Messiah that we find here is entirely new coming from the earliest theologians of the church.

Eventually Logos, the Word, the Christ, became second person of the Trinity, who became human in Jesus. With that adoption came the extraordinary understanding that in the incarnation, in the birth of Jesus, God became human. This was not a lowering of God to become human, but a raising of humanity to the level of God.

Irenaeus wrote in the third century: Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is. This is especially important for us to know as Episcopalians because we are an incarnational people. The word Incarnate means in meat, in flesh. Something that could not be seen, God, became flesh and blood, became a man. Just as God became human and the Christ became Jesus, the man; so God in Christ continues to become human, within each of us.

Think how this changes our world. Every person has Christ within themselves, and we are to honor each other, knowing all people bear Christ. In the sacrament of Holy Baptism, we reinforce this belief in the question asked of each person being baptized and of us each time we renew our baptismal vows: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? To which you and I respond: I will with God’s help.

We see the impact of this understanding in our approach to hospitality. One of my favorite phrases from Holy Scripture these days is the words from the letter to the Hebrews: 13th Chapter: Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. They are a beautiful sentiment, but also words that contain a challenging message. Certainly not all strangers will treat us as if they were angels. We must not put ourselves in situations where others can take advantage of us. But we are challenged to see the Christ in every person we meet.

When I stand in the back of the church after the service to greet visitors, I think of those words. The people Jesus brings to our door bear Christ within them, in welcoming them we welcome Christ. That is always a joyous experience. But, clearly, we are challenged as well. The person
that troubles us, bears Christ within them. The sick, the poverty stricken, those in prison—each bears Christ within them. As Christians we must understand our responsibilities to those persons as well.

These sense of incarnation impacts our expectation of transformation for each of us as we move through life. Every person has Christ within himself, and through our prayer, through the sacrament, that part of us that is Christ is enlivened, energized, strengthened. Eventually we may come to see the goal of our whole lives to allow that Christ within us to change us so that we can become more and more fully who we were born to be, who we truly are.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that we use for our lectionary readings, the version you heard today, translates the last words of this section as The Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth. I prefer the words of the Roman rite: and we have seen his glory...filled with enduring love.

We know few provable facts about the birth of Jesus. But I wonder how much we need to know. Clearly a baby was born two millennia ago who grew into a man who has changed the world. If we know nothing more than the fact that 2000 years later people’s lives are changed by him, and that they know life and death, and love and forgiveness, and justice and peace in new and life transforming ways, we know all we need to know.

In conclusion let me read to you the words of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, from his book, Seasons of Celebration, written in the 1950s: (The language is more masculine than we might use today, but the message is profound.)

Christ is born. He is born to us. And, He is born today. ...Today, Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who was in the beginning with the Father, in whom all things were made, by whom all things consist, enters into the world which he created in order to reclaim souls who had forgotten their identity. Therefore, the church exults, as the angels come down to announce not merely an old thing which happened long ago, but a new thing which happens today. (1)

And today, this morning, in this place, and throughout the world, we who follow Jesus speak and pray and sing in joy and celebration. Jesus has been born to you and to me. The old thing that happened so long ago is part of our lives, part of your reality and my reality. The Word that was with God in the beginning is a new thing happening to us today.

May we continue to know and see and become this glory...filled with enduring love.