

Christmas Day, Year B
Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-18 [RSV]

Rev. Leslie Nunez Steffensen

Problem in the Text

The Gospel reading for today seems to be out of place. Where is the baby in the manger? It is Christmas Day and I want my baby in the manger! But our gospel reading is coming at us from an entirely different direction. It feels like a conspiracy - the committee on the Lectionary for the Episcopal Church is moving us away from the lowly manger, from the stable in Bethlehem, and into the cosmic realm. These first verses are really more like a thesis statement for the message of St. John's Gospel, his account of why Jesus matters. Can't we just pause and adore for a while longer? Why must we be abruptly moved along? The Evangelist's words take us so very far away from our crèche and Christmas trees, from the stockings and feasts appointed for this day, for Christmas Day.

In fact, St. John takes back to the very first day – well, even before that very first day when there was just God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” Can you hang a stocking on that? Taken out of context, the world seems to join me in this sentiment of confusion...

Problem in the World

I recently got involved in reading a heated exchange on Facebook Comments between an old friend of mine from middle school and a college mate of his. Essentially, my friend Mark was saying he was going to “unfriend” some of his Facebook friends who he had known growing up or in college but with whom he really didn't have much in common. Some of these people had apparently been posting ugly political comments and/or frequent fundamental and religiously zealous posts which my friend Mark didn't want cluttering up his time, his mind, or his FB page anymore. I'm not sure, but his college mate may have been one of the ones Mark intended to cut off because in his comment he was going on and on about religion and politics. I didn't know a post could be as many words as this fellow was writing.

At one point in his passionate diatribe, he wrote, and I quote, “the Bible itself is a fable used to control society. The basic tenet of spirituality is to treat each other with love and kindness....man made up all the rest. Mary Magdalene wasn't a prostitute; Mary wasn't a virgin. Job's wife (He meant Lot) didn't look back and turn into salt.

All of this is historically proven. People who use the Bible to argue points are non-thinking lemmings. Jesus was not nailed to the cross; they tied him there, pulled him down before sunset, and three days later he showed up in society again. There was not ascension, etc.” He continued on.

I wondered about his obvious anger over this topic, about wise use of time at work, and about his outing of himself as biblically illiterate. I was also thankful that my children did not apply to their alma mater – I'd want my money back if that hefty private tuition netted an adult that clearly lacked the ability to research properly, process information deeply, and present an argument clearly. In today's lesson from Isaiah we heard, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”” This man does not have beautiful feet. But is that his fault?

There are many people like this guy in the world, for whom Christmas morning is just another day with corny music and maybe some presents. If they believe that Jesus was just a man who taught some solid philosophy about doing to others as you'd have them do to you – then at best, the baby in the manger is just a sweet story. But it's just a baby, nothing particularly special. I can't fault the guy because he obviously has a very loose grip upon what it means to be a Christian. He has a passing knowledge of some biblical story arcs, but no deep engagement with what it is all about or what it means to have faith. If one's chief source for understanding the

nativity is the Little Drummer Boy or has if one has gleaned their personal ethics from Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer, a nativity scene wouldn't sustain a person wrestling with life's existential questions.

When there is bad news about in-fighting and political maneuvering and misbehavior by priests in the headlines, I can't blame anyone for feeling as if they ought to just write off "organized religion." I wouldn't want to bother joining a church, either. Where does a *bisque* figure of a little blond-headed baby in a cradle of hay fit into their world?

Grace in the Text

But that baby is precisely the key to this day and to our faith that his birth is something to mark – it is something worth throwing a party over, it is something worth gathering friends and family to celebrate, it is something worth stopping the world for a few hours, and it is something worth worshipping.

That is what St. John wanted to crow to the world about – he was so excited about this baby Jesus that he began at the beginning, the beginning that was even before the "in the beginning" of Genesis. John was working with a revelation about *who* Jesus was that was so exciting he put it before any historical account of Jesus' birth or ministry as his fellow gospel writers chose to do. St. John went right to the heart of his theological understanding of the person of Jesus and his incarnation: this God made humble man.

"In the beginning was the Word... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father... And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace." Because that baby was born, the Word became one of us and joined us to God in a new way, not just as His people, but as his children. John wrote, "The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

I think this prologue really lays the foundation for St. John's triumphal summation of what this day, Christmas Day is all about, which is found in the third chapter. Although it is reading ahead in the story, I will take this opportunity to just pull it out, like a trump card: John chapter 3, verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It is like a bookend to the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us" of today's reading in chapter one. In the old days when everybody seemed to go to church, maybe the nativity figurines didn't need subtitles, but perhaps every crèche today needs one of these quotes from St. John to put it into context. The nativity was not about the cows and donkeys, or the sheep. They have their part of the story but there was more. It was not just about a poor baby born into homelessness in a uniquely enchanting way. It is all about joy and peace and light and, most importantly it is about *salvation*.

Grace in the World

I'm not sure anything I could possibly post on Facebook would get through to Mark's college mate. I am going to have to be okay with that. But I can continue to pray for this broken world, and for all of us broken people within it. We need the baby who was born two thousand years ago in a simple manger. We need him because within him he contained God's will for mankind for true life which death cannot conquer. God's will for us, which is light and hope and grace. We could not see God but because of the baby born in Bethlehem, we know the Father. In his gospel, John links that cosmic, all powerful God with the baby in the manger. "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." I think we can hang our stockings on that – I think we can hang our very lives upon it.

Amen.