

This is the Christmas Story, the third time the Bible tells it. It is the same story of the manger and the Shepherds and the Angels - and the same story St Matthew tells in his Gospel, with Joseph's dreams, prophecies and the wise men; but the point of view is different, and St John's Gospel sounds strange to ears more accustomed to descriptions of crowded inns and Angel Choirs. That's because different people in the family are telling the same story.

You see, St Luke, who wrote the familiar story we heard on Christmas night, was a bit of an historian. He was very concerned with getting the dates and rulers right, and locating everything in time and space. He was also likely a gentile, and was very concerned about the role of people who, like him, were considered outsiders. So he is more concerned with shepherds - who were social outcasts - than about kings. And St Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary - a radical move in itself, since women were even lower on the social ladder than shepherds.

St Matthew is more traditional. He was certainly a Jew and may have been a scribe. He was very concerned with making it clear that Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies as Messiah, King of Jews. So shepherds didn't interest him as much as royal wise men who we see going the nativity scene today; and he cared much about the flight to Egypt and parallels of the Exodus in Jesus' return from Egypt to Israel. Also, the more conservative St Matthew told the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's point of view.

Then there was St John. St John knew, in one way or another, about the stories in St Matthew and St Luke, and he assumes that we know about them, too. But St John is a theologian, and a mystic. So, since he (and we) already know the "historical" details of Jesus' birth, St John writes of its meaning, and he writes from his theology, and from the holy imagination of his prayers. But it is the same story- all three are talking about the same birth - all three are saying the same thing.

St John does begin the story earlier - he reminds us that Christmas really begins just before where Genesis begins as our reading from Proverbs reminds us - before the beginning with God in creation. So, using language evocative of Genesis, John begins by talking about the Word of God — the Word of God here is God in action, God creating, revealing, and redeeming. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. Then he tells the Christmas story — in nine words (in Greek and in English). "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." He who was with God in creation, the one who is God at work in history and human life, this one became a person, became flesh — as completely human as you and I. Not God with a "people-suit" disguise on; not a really good person who God rewarded and made special, not a super angel God created early and saved up for Bethlehem.

But a person, who was the Word — who was God's own self. Soaring words for the most down-to-earth thing that ever happened. But still the Christmas story, still the story St Luke tells, and St Matthew tells: the story of the birth of Jesus.

In addition to telling the same story, St Matthew, St Luke, and St John share one special way of telling it — there is one image, one symbol, and only one, that they all use to talk about Christmas. (Can you think of what it is?)

They all talk about light — the light of the star, the light that shone around the shepherds, the true light that enlightens every human person. They all continue Isaiah's vision of light shining on those who live in darkness.

Where Christ is, people who understand talk about light. They have to — there is no better image of what is going on. The light shines in the darkness — John proclaims. And somehow we understand this and we understand that this truth cannot be fully expressed in any other words.

In large part, we probably understand because we know about darkness—we know what it is like to live in and with darkness. Remember what it is like to try to walk through an unfamiliar room that is in total darkness — or wake up confused in the middle of the night — trying to get somewhere? We know what it's like when we don't know where things are, and when we don't know what we have just bumped into, or whether we're going where we want to go, or if the next step will be OK or if it will break something and make a mess. We know how easy it is to go in circles in the dark, and to get turned around, and to stub a toe and get angry and hit whatever is handy. And we know what it is like to live like that in broad daylight.

What St John, and St Luke and St Matthew all say about Christmas is that a light begins to shine: suddenly, quietly, but absolutely certainly. And by that light we can begin to see. By that light we can begin to see who we are and who we are created to be. For it is in the person of Jesus that what it means to be a human being is finally made clear. In him we see that our lives are made whole as we surrender them in love and service; in him we see that really being alive means risking everything for-and because of — the love of God and the Kingdom of God. In him we see that hope needs never be abandoned — never — and that we contain possibilities beyond our imagining.

Also, by that light that has come into the world we begin to see God really clearly for the first time. "No one has ever seen God," St John reminds us. But God is made known to us in Jesus. So all that we thought about God, all we had worked out, all that we were sure we knew about God — all of that is put to the test in Jesus. Who God is, in relationship to us, is fully revealed in Jesus. Not in one saying or one parable, or one miracle — but in all of him — in his life, death and resurrection — we finally have the light to see God.

The light of Christ, the word made flesh, comes among us at Christmas — and we celebrate its coming into the world. God had revealed God's love to us in Christ. That first Christmas, the stable stank, and the light shone — and it continues to shine — and continues to allow us to see, and to show a world living in darkness what we have seen. For by that light we have been given power to become children of God — and to take our places with the light. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

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