

“The Word”

Every now and again I find it freeing—almost healing—to throw out some wildly unsubstantiated conjecture—something I just think *ought* to be true. Here goes: Christmas is supposed to last twelve days because the people who got this holiday started wanted to be sure it was working.

Here’s my reasoning (if you can call it that): Christmas is not just a single day but an actual twelve day season of the church year, beginning on Christmas Eve and continuing through Epiphany, January 6, observed in many places as the traditional date when the wise men arrive to adore the Christ child. Nobody knows when Jesus was actually born. We celebrate his birth on December 25 because it is near the time when the pagan Roman Empire had a major festival, saturnalia, celebrating the point in the year when (in the northern hemisphere) days begin to get longer again. Until about December 21 there is less daylight every day; then we just sort of pause at a point of equilibrium for a couple of days; then the days begin ever so slowly to get longer. Ancient people used to light huge logs—Yule logs—to rejoice in the lengthening of days. But it can take a while before we’re sure the days are actually getting longer as they’re supposed to... like maybe a couple of weeks... something like twelve days?

After twelve days you can tell something is different. It’s purely coincidence, but there’s even a little bit of this sort of language in the scripture reading for today: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The tide has turned. Something *is* different.

And of course with Christmas, something is *supposed* to be different: not just the cluttering of our homes with new stuff and the enhancement of our waistlines from the stuffing of ourselves, but something real and lasting. A child has been born, right? Well, if something has been born in our world, if something has been born in us... something should be different.

The author of John’s Gospel tries to give us a clue. Following the cardinal rule of public speaking (Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them) he tips his hand completely before he even launches into the story of Jesus. He wants us to know the significance of what we’re going to be hearing: that Jesus is the Word of God. Through the Word, God creates everything that is. Through the Word,

God gives the gifts of light and life. The Word comes forth from the being of God—is one with the being of God. And in Jesus Christ that living Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

So when we're listening to Jesus, John wants us to know, we're listening to God. When we're seeing Jesus, we're seeing God: not just in the physical person of Jesus, but in the life he lived, the things he stood for, the way he died, the way he still lives within us and among us. Jesus is the living metaphor that makes God known: the bread of life, the living water, the good shepherd, the true vine, the light of the world, and on and on. Jesus is God revealed in and through human life and love.

So... does it *have* to be Jesus? For John the answer to that is Yes. And he wants us to know it from the very beginning, to attune our eyes and ears and hearts to the story we're about to hear; because John wants us not just to believe the story but to believe *in* the story, to know and to trust and to love the Jesus about whom he is writing. John can hardly say anything about God without talking about Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word..." right from the get-go.

So... is everybody else wrong? If other faiths come to God by other paths, and they simply living in error? John's gospel is not a treatise on comparative religions. It is a testimony to Jesus Christ, a description of what it means to be a Christian and the light and life Jesus offers. This is a distinctive Christian witness, and placing Jesus Christ at the center is what makes a faith community Christian. Others may seek God in other ways, and it is for God to judge; but as the old spiritual says, "give me Jesus."

What John is issuing here is not an intellectual puzzle or a theological challenge, but an invitation. It's the same invitation that is offered to Jesus' first followers: "Come and see."¹

Or, as Frederick Buechner writes,

Adeste fidelis. That is the only answer I know for people who want to find out whether or not this is true. Come all ye faithful, and all ye who would like to be faithful if only you could, all ye who walk in darkness and hunger for light. Have faith enough, hope enough, despair enough, foolishness enough, at least to draw near to see for yourselves.²

¹ John 1:46.

² From a sermon entitled, "Come and See" in *The Hungering Dark*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1969, p. 55.

That's it, isn't it? Come and see. In the weeks and months to come, we will do precisely that, immersing ourselves in the Jesus story as we find it not in John's Gospel, but in the Gospel According to Luke: Jesus the healer, Jesus the wonderful, story-telling teacher, Jesus who comes to dinner and changes all the rules about who is welcome at the table, Jesus who sets his face toward Jerusalem and who all along the way teaches about the meaning of love and justice.

Come and see. Let your life be different as it is different when some major newness comes into it. With the arrival of a newborn baby, everything is different: schedules and meals and sleeping and where we go and what we do and how we think about absolutely everything. Normal isn't normal for a while. Normal becomes redefined in a thousand ways that aren't all clear at the beginning. Something new is here.

Christmas is an invitation to step through a door into a new place, a relationship of love and growth. Jesus is the Word of God revealed in a human life: watch him, listen to him, learn from him, follow him, trust him, take his life into your own life. The culmination of Christmas is not just in packing away the decorations and changing the scenery, but feeling a new life growing within us, letting it live within us.

We begin at the table, that most intimate symbol of taking Christ into ourselves and allowing our lives to be sustained by his life, our spirits renewed by his spirit, our love shaped by his love. The Word made flesh takes life in our flesh, that he might live in us and we might truly live through him.

O come, all ye faithful. Come and see.

Amen

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