

Advent Lutheran Church
Merry Wordmas!
December 25, 2024
John 1:1-14

If you are like most people when you think of the Christmas story you remember it a lot like the children presented it in this morning's video.¹ This version of the story is set in Bethlehem with a star and a manager. It features a cast of characters from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, including Mary and Joseph, wise men, angels. It's an account that includes no room in the inn as we were reminded a few nights ago in our bilingual Las Posadas service.

Many of us know and like hodge podge pageants that freely blend elements of two stories to create one new unified account. And we are mostly okay with a few modern additions tossed in here and there that cannot be found in Matthew or Luke.

For many of us this story is as much a part of how we celebrate as is gathering to worship in a candlelit sanctuary while singing Silent Night.

And to all of this, I say: Merry Christmas!

Merry Christmas. Our celebration is well underway. These stories are an important part of our shared story.

Now, I invite you to join me in also sharing the less familiar greeting, "Merry Wordmas."

Go ahead. Let's try it. Merry Wordmas.

I'm wondering if that phrase doesn't feel quite right for you. Perhaps it seems off. Maybe it is a lot like our Gospel reading.

John's account of Christmas is well . . . different. It's highbrow. It's philosophical. It's beautiful. And, it is an account that focuses on word rather than on Mary and Joseph.

¹ St. Paul's Auckland. "The Christmas Story." Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zduwusyip8M>

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.²

The first verse in the first chapter of John's Gospel sounds a lot like the first beginning – the one recorded in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. In Genesis the first words we read are "in the beginning."³

John tells us that in the beginning was the word. John wants us to know that the arrival of God in human flesh has taken much longer than nine months.

Presbyterian Pastor John Buchanan puts it this way:

In the beginning was the Word. In the beginning is God's impulse to speak, to communicate. God speaks and creation happens, which, because it is a product of God's self-communication, contains the reality of God: God revealed in sun, moon, stars, in lakes, and oceans, and forests. God revealed in nature. But there is more to it than nature.⁴

And now John is telling us in this first verse that God didn't arrive first in a cradle but at creation. And this word that was present at the beginning is present now in the form of a human baby – the one we call Jesus. The one we welcomed last night as Savior, Messiah, and Lord.⁵ And, also as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.⁶

Emmanuel has come. God with skin on has been born. And, it is something so incredible that our vocabulary struggles to effectively communicate it.

Craig Satterlee, an ELCA bishop, invites us to hear John's familiar prologue in a new way by substituting the word "speech" for

² John 1:1.

³ Genesis 1:1.

⁴ John Buchanan. "The Light." Available from www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2002/011302.html

⁵ Luke 2:11.

⁶ Isaiah 9:6.

“word” throughout the passage.⁷ As I read it in this new way I invite you to listen as if this is the first time you have ever heard the passage.

In the beginning was the Speech, and the Speech was with God, and the Speech was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

The Speech became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.⁸

There you have it. The Christmas story.

The story is that simple and that complex. It is a reminder that our God was, is, and is to come. It is a connector explaining how we have become children of God. And, it is an encouragement that the miracle of Christmas isn’t a one-time event.

⁷ Craig A. Satterlee. “Commentary on John 1:1-14.” Available from www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/christmas-day-nativity-of-our-lord-iii/commentary-on-john-11-14

⁸ John 1:1-14, NIV with Speech substituted for Word.

Some of you know that while I am indeed serving as your pastor, I am ordained in another denomination: The United Church of Christ. That tradition is one that is especially attentive to understanding God as a Still Speaking God. They are not shy about understanding “word” as “speech” and to hear “speech” and “speaking.”

For them, it began with Pastor John Robinson’s sermon to folks as they prepared for their journey on the Mayflower to the land we now call the United States of America:

There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s Holy Word.

And, it was popularized for the current generation by Pastor Ron Buford in what became known as the Still Speaking Campaign. This initiative in the early 2000s introduced the world to a Gracie Allen quote:

Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

Today I’m wearing a stole emblazoned with an oversized red comma. It is a visual reminder that the baby born in Bethlehem is the God who was present at creation and who is Still Speaking.

Merry Christmas. Merry Wordmas. Merry Speechmas.

Amen.