

Christmas 2B Year A

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 7 – 14

Psalm 147

Ephesians 1: 3 – 14

John 1: 1 – 18

According to the church calendar we are still in the season of Christmas. January 5 is the twelfth of twelve days of Christmas, the final day of feasting that leads from the celebration of Jesus' birth to the arrival of the magi (or Jesus' baptism, depending on the tradition one comes from). But as far as the rest of the

world is concerned, it's the fifth day of a new year. The New Year celebrations have been our recent focus making Christmas a distant memory. Most of our resolutions have probably already failed, and we're now back to all the ordinary challenges and mundane activities that all too often feel more like a daily grind than daily life. We're back to what we're used to – our reality.

I think this is precisely why we need a reminder that Christmas isn't just a holiday or festival; rather it witnesses to a reality that permeates our whole life. And there could be no better passage to remind us of the ongoing

significance of Christmas than the passage we have from the fourth Gospel – the Gospel of John. In the prologue, John invites us to contemplate a non-sentimental Christmas that fills us with hope and joy for the whole year.

First, notice that John’s “Christmas story” does not give accounts like what Matthew and Luke convey. John doesn’t focus on angels or shepherds and seems to know nothing of a young mother or the magi. Indeed, John’s story is hardly about the birth of Jesus at all but instead focuses on the difference that birth makes for all of us.

There are, on the whole, just two crucial lines that deal with Jesus' birth and what we often call the incarnation. John 1:1 is the first: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God." The second comes at verse 14: "And the Word" -- that was with God and is God -- "became flesh and dwelt among us." There it is: John's Christmas story, the story of God becoming human, taking on our humanity and our life that we might live and love and struggle and die with hope.

But that's not all John offers. While he sums up the Christmas story in just two lines, he

spends more time on the significance of Christmas by shifting attention from Jesus' birth to ours. It is in John that we hear clearly that we must be born again (Jn. 3:1-8). In fact, John is actually less interested in the birth of a baby at Bethlehem than he is in the birth of you and me as children of God.

Listen, again, to the verses (10-13) we often skip over in our haste to get to the close of his two-verse Christmas story:

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his

own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Did you catch that? Jesus came that we might become children of God. Children that is, who are not dominated by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, not defined by our limitations or hurts, and whose destinies are not controlled by others. Rather, we are those individuals and people who know ourselves to be God's own beloved children.

To fully appreciate the significance of what John is saying, I think we need to distinguish briefly between those things that describe us and those that define us. All too often, I believe, we allow certain elements of our life to dominate and define us. Things like our upbringing or interests, our good experiences and our bad ones, our current marital state or our sexuality, our past triumphs or tragedies, or even our qualifications. Don't get me wrong, these things matter and are what I would call descriptively true. But all too often we allow them not just to describe parts of our life but to define us completely.

In these verses, John invites us to hold all of the ordinary things that describe us as important but insufficient; as valuable but partial; as meaningful but not definitive. What is definitive -- and therefore more important than all the good or bad things we carry with us -- is that God has called us God's own children, people who hold infinite worth in God's eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God's beloved world.

Can we imagine that? That Jesus came and was born, lived, died, and was raised again not simply to pay some obscure "penalty for

sin” but rather to remind us and even convince us that God loves us more than anything?

The challenge is, can we practice it? Can we practice living as beloved children of God?

I wonder if something like this might help us. I'd like you to invite you to begin on this day and continue for the rest of January a simple but also, I think, a profound exercise.

Once every day -- and it will be easier if it's the same time each day -- look in the mirror

and say the following: “I am God’s child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world.” (Repeat)

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But in my experience, these words are actually rather hard to say and even harder to believe. Which is why we need to do it every day for the rest of the month. Because the first few times you say it, you’re likely not to believe it; that is, all those descriptive things about you -- especially those that are difficult or that you don’t like -- will begin to creep in and voice doubts about what you are confessing.

It will sound different for each person, of course, but many of these negative messages will likely run something like this: “You, a child of God? But what about your failed job or marriage? What about when you disappointed your parents or children? And don’t forget about all the mistakes, trouble, and pain you’ve caused for yourself and others. Yes, maybe God loves you, but you don’t really deserve that love, and you’re certainly not in a position to change yourself, let alone the world.”

These are very sobering words to hear and may even ring true. And this is why John’s

unsentimental Christmas message is so important. Because in the face of all these messages -- many of which are rooted in something that is descriptively true (like us having made mistakes, disappointing ourselves and others, and all the rest) -- John asserts that what is definitively true about each and everyone of us is that Jesus gives us the “power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” And nothing can change that.

So start by saying those words aloud -- right now: “I am God’s child, deserving of love and

respect, and God will use me to change the world.” Again, I also invite you all to say these words every day for the rest of the month.

Today, we proclaim John’s unsentimental Christmas story five days into a new year already surrounded by failing resolutions and facing an uncertain future. We do it so that we may hear again the astounding message that God has called us to be God’s own beloved children and has marvellous things in store for each of us.

In this New Year 2014, things may not always work out the way we planned, but by having Christ born in us, and making us children of God, we have hope nonetheless. As we grow up as children of God and learn, even from our mistakes, we do so in this hope so that we might live out more faithfully the life God has called us into. This is a life defined by God's purpose in us and for us. And just as God's purpose can change our life, so can we influence change in our homes, our friendships, our neighbourhood, our workplace, our community, our country, even in the world.

Happy New Year. Amen.