

Landing in reverence, rising to witness

The First Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 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.

All genuflect.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Rise.

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. **John 1:1-18**

The Prologue to the Gospel of John that we just heard covers so much magnificent and varied theological terrain that Bible scholars often advise preachers to carefully choose their sermon itineraries. David Lose, for instance, writes: "*There are so many themes worth exploring [here] that it can be difficult to decide just where to land for a sermon.*"

His language of *landing* seems particularly apt. In the middle of our gospel proclamation on this day, we uniquely, literally land on our knees. We pause, and genuflect. We remain on bended knee as we hear that "*... the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*"

We land on our knees for only one verse, but the posture is appropriate to the whole of this Prologue. We contemplate the nature and preexistence of God, and the lively, reciprocal interrelationship between God the Father and God the Son, the living, divine Word who has come into the world and become flesh. We surmise God's loving will toward us as we hear that "*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*"

On our knees may also be the best place to be reminded of the complexity of divine-and-human connections and disconnections: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* Here is a place we may ever return and land, still on bended knee, when we fail, when we witness

cruelty or indifference, when we are confronted by the latest news of greed, violence and deceit. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

We may find ourselves returning to this contemplative landing place again and again throughout the Gospel of John. Along the way, we will taste water that has become wine. We will be nourished by living bread that comes down from heaven. We who think ourselves well-educated will be invited with learned Nicodemus to set aside all of our accumulated knowledge, all of our prior ways of knowing, in order to become *born from above*. Along with his closest followers, Jesus will eventually invite us to become his friends, friends of God.

In the Annunciation story we heard last Sunday we noted Mary's response of pondering. At our Christmas masses we found her pondering again in response to some bedazzled shepherds. Her pondering anticipates and is emblematic of our own Christian practice of contemplation and seems one fitting response to the Prologue to John. I encourage us all to set aside time during these Twelve Days of Christmas to pour over these Christmas gospels, to note when and where they *land* in our hearts, and to remain there with them a bit, on bended knee, as it were.

From bended knee we do rise, whether after one verse or for a longer time. True withdrawal and contemplation for Christians results in our rising to the occasion of the world's darkness to become witnesses, prophets and activists. We, along with the divine Word Jesus are to be lights that shine in the darkness, lights not overcome by it. This is, in fact, exactly what we prayed for in today's Collect: "*Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives ...*"

A scholar by the name of Karoline Lewis argues that this witnessing theme is introduced in the Prologue to John by John the Baptist, or, more rightly here, John the Witness. He "*is a rather strange interlude in this cosmic birth story.*" she acknowledges, asking, "*What is John doing here anyway? Commentators explain away John's presence as a later interpolation that does not belong in such a majestic narration of Jesus' origins and identity. Yet the presence of John here ... suggests that a critical response to Christmas is witness. Christmas is not over when the trees are put out to the curb. Christmas is just getting started for those who confess Jesus as God who has become flesh.*"

In response to this Prologue to the Gospel of John, let us find a time and place, today and in coming days, to genuflect, to land on our knees, to contemplate; and let us also, with John, and with Mary, and with all the Communion of Saints, rise to witness.