

Sermon for 26 December 2010
The Sunday after Christmas, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

On Friday night we heard again that wonderful account of Christ's birth from Luke, the story we most closely associate with Christmas. We are asked this week to back up more than a little bit, as the Church has never been much for sticking to a strict chronological account as we wend our way through the liturgical year. We are asked, in fact, to consider this week the beginning of the backstory of Christmas, and more than that, the very beginning of everything:

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 were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

One wonders how the first Christians to hear *this* account of the Christmas story reacted. Keep in mind that John's Gospel is much later in origin

than the other (what we call "synoptic") Gospels, and it is entirely possible that this story's first audience had heard the beautiful account from Luke that many of us heard the other night and the rousing tale of adventure and political intrigue from Matthew that we'll hear next week. But here, there aren't shepherds and mangers and angels. There aren't magi from the East following yonder star and wicked Herod plotting some foul scheme. There's something much different going on in this reading, something with remarkable theological depth, something which is (to be honest) rather baffling.

The passage has become familiar to us, I suspect, but its depths of meaning and nuance can elude us. N.T. Wright once said that you can say a hundred things about these eighteen short verses, though I personally doubt that a hundred point sermon will go over very well, especially as many of us are suffering from holiday induced exhaustion

or at least a little turkey hangover. That being the case, I'll limit myself to one point.

Over the last couple years, many of you have been subjected to little Greek lessons in my sermons, but if there is one Greek term out of all of those that you ought to try to remember it is the following: *logos*. It's the word that's translated as "Word" in the first verse of today's gospel. You've probably experienced it before in English as a kind of suffix meaning "talk" in the sense of subject matter. So "theology" means something like "God talk" and "technology" means something like "skill talk" or "science talk". *Logos* has something to do with "discourse".

But, it means a great deal more than that. "In the beginning was the *discourse*, and the *discourse* was with God, and the *discourse* was God" doesn't make a lot of sense. But if you think about our translation "In the beginning was the Word &c.", it

doesn't make a whole lot of sense either. It's just so familiar that we think it does.

There's another word in English we get from this funny Greek word *logos* that might get us closer to an understanding: *logic*. Now, when I was in college, I had to take a couple of semesters of logic, and it was mostly about translating statements like "If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man then Socrates is mortal" into funny qusai-mathematical equations with various doodles in place of words. It was, in the end, a beneficial exercise, and necessary to do more interesting things in philosophy, but that's not all we mean when we use the word "logic".

We might say that an exercise or structure contains "a certain logic" or that it doesn't. There's "a certain logic" to working a puzzle; there may or may not be "a certain logic" to winning at the craps table at the Bellagio. There's a certain logic in the design of a medieval

cathedral or a modern skyscraper; not so with a building designed by a postmodern architect like Frank Gehry.

When we use "logic" in this sense we mean something like elegance and order, a quality held by something that's intuitive, that we can wrap our minds around and figure out.

I think this gets us closer to an understanding of John's use of the word *logos*. In the beginning there was some ordering principle, something by which the cosmos came to make sense, to all hang together, as it were. And that principle of order and elegance was with God and it was God.

I think a particle physicist or a mathematician, no matter how agnostic he or she is on the question of God, would have to say that our universe holds a beautiful sense of order. The complexity of the natural world is startling, but at its heart is an elegant intuitiveness. As Christians, we can find meaning in what we believe

to be a created order. As complex as the processes that got us here are—from however a tiny singularity expanded into the known universe to the finer points of biological evolution to the development of human consciousness and moral sensibility—those processes can, I think, be seen in a theological framework as having been governed by some divine order.

And this brings us back to the *logos* as it relates to the Christmas story, because, believe it or not, there is a point to all this. While the great majority of the cosmos behaves in ways that are at least theoretically predictable, human will seems a somehow less elegant creation. This is not, of course, because mankind was made any less perfectly than the physical world in which it finds itself. Quite to the contrary, so perfect a creation is man that he can rebel against the order of things, that he can choose disorder, which in theological terms we call "sin".

A few verses into John's prologue we discover precisely whom the *logos*, the ordering principle of creation *is*:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

John tells us that the force which gave order to everything has become that which is disordered, that which has rebelled against order, a human being- a baby in a manger who would grow into a man, and though without the stain of original sin the rest of us have inherited, nonetheless just as capable of engaging in particular sins, just as capable of falling like Adam, but who ultimately triumphed over those temptations. Thus, the possibility of a new order among rebellious humankind was made real.

"To all who received him," John continues, "who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, But

of God." We are offered by God's Grace regeneration, rebirth, through Baptism, which is not a mere symbol, but an objective means of transformation. In it, we are made new creations and given a chance to set aside our inordinate desires in favor of the particular logic of God's Will, the *logos* by which he ordered all things. In more simple terms, we are able to follow Christ. What a tremendous Christmas gift that is.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.