

Several years ago Garrison Keillor posted an about the wonder of Christmas for Salon. He wrote of an experience he had of teaching Youth Sunday School at an Episcopal Church.

We sat in a sort of triangle, two couches at a right angle, a line of chairs, a window looking out at the snow on Amsterdam Avenue, and talked about the rather improbable notion that God sent Himself to Earth in human form, impregnating a virgin who, along with her confused fiancé, journeyed to Bethlehem where no rooms were available at the inn (it was the holidays, after all), and so God was born in a stable, wrapped in cloths and laid in a feed trough and worshipped by shepherds summoned by angels and by Eastern dignitaries who had followed a star.

This magical story is a cornerstone of the [Christian](#) faith and I am sorry if it's a big hurdle for the skeptical young. It is to the Church what his Kryptonian heritage was to Clark Kent -- it enables us to stop speeding locomotives and leap tall buildings at a single bound, and also to love our neighbors as ourselves. Without the Nativity, we become a sort of lecture series and coffee club, with not very good coffee and sort of aimless lectures.<sup>1</sup>

In response to his article one woman wrote that she seldom went to church, but always made a point to go a Christmas. She mentioned the kindness, the gentleness, the hospitably, the sweet generosity, and open welcome that so often rest in these special days. She said she it all, loved the carols the trees and candles, the Christmas Story. She lamented almost bitterly that it was all soon gone. In no time, Christmas was over and everything was back to normal, - no Christmas Magic, not so kind, never gentle, and anything but sweetly generous. Christmas just doesn't last she wrote.<sup>2</sup>

John's gospel is unique in many ways. This introduction stands on it's own. There is much debate in scholarship about the origin of these opening lines, some have understood them as an ancient hymn. Marks gospel begins abruptly immediately moving to John the Baptizer. Matthew begins with a genealogy starting from Abraham and Luke's Gospel genealogy starts back even further with Adam. The opening to this Gospel is cosmic, eternal. In the beginning was the word. The author is clearly drawing a direct line to the opening words of Genesis, stating that lineage of Jesus goes back even further. "Before Abraham was, before Adam was, before time was, God was."<sup>3</sup> In that word was life and that life was light to all people. The darkness rose up against but it could defeat the light. This is an epic opening. Light on one side and darkness on the other squared off in an eternal battle, and the light will win.

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<sup>1</sup> Garrison, Keillor, " Away in an Awesome Manger," Dec. 5, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Pg 111, Connections

<sup>3</sup> Pg 2 the light has come

Suddenly the text changes course we move from a sweeping vision of creation, light, and darkness to one single life. It is like moving from the Sun to one single candle. A man who was sent by God who came to testify to that light. That man's name was John. John, John the Baptizer, John the cousin of Jesus. I always find this interesting that Jesus has a cousin. It makes you wonder what this relationship was like? Cousins are kind of funny, when they are close in age they are almost like siblings. One of my boys has a cousin who two days younger than him, they spend a lot of time together and when they get together they act like brothers. It makes you wonder what kind of time John and Jesus spent together? Did they get a long? You have to wonder knowing John's reputation for living in the wild eating locusts and honey, he is clearly an opinionated guy. Did John debate Jesus? Did he ever debate God? Did John always understand who Jesus was? The text doesn't offer any insight but again points us back again to light threw the one who witnesses to the light. The light the word is coming.

Then we move again to reflect on that word coming into the world. He was in the world but the world did not know him. His own didn't accept him, but all who received him he gave the power to become children God. Children, born not of will but of God. Wow!

Roget Nishioka tells the following story; a loving family adopted Sarah Lynn as an infant. As a young child, one of her favorite activities was to sit with her parents and older brother at night a read a book together. One evening her mother was reading to her from a book that had become one of her favorites. It was a children's picture book about a little girl being adopted and finding her new family. As her mother was reading one night, Sarah Lynn interrupted and if understanding for the first time, said to her Mom, "I am adopted too." Her Mom said, "Yes, you are adopted too, Sarah Lynn." Then Sarah Lynn looked at her and said, "Only you are not my new family. You are the family I was supposed to be with from before I was born." God gave power to become the Children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God. <sup>4</sup>

Finally all the threads of this ancient hymn are pulled together. The eternal Word who was at the creation of the world becomes flesh. The Revealer, Jesus, is not a mere man, but is the Word of God made flesh, become human. The Word lived among us, not simply in the world. The verb here means "to make one's dwelling". It is a purposeful word that recalls God's promise to dwell with God's people. It has the same root as tabernacle or tent, this is place the God spoke to Moses where God revealed God's glory to Moses. The idea is that God setup a tent that God moved into the neighborhood and dwelt with the people. This is God as your neighbor.

Reading this text one might be under the impression that God is swooping in suddenly. That suddenly God would swing in for a visit, maybe speak to the nation of Israel, maybe share the law, maybe deliver the people from Egypt then back up to heaven. Many of us probably view God in this way. We have a problem at work, with our spouse, or at school and we earnestly hoping God will intervene. This text though is making a bolder claim. That even when the world resets and goes back to normal, that even when our pessimism rises up, every moment contains a little

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<sup>4</sup> Connections, 137.

Christmas. That Christmas does last. This text is really telling us that God is with us always, that God is forever proximate, always and everywhere as near as our own breath. God is encountered in that which is close at hand. The ordinary is no longer what it appears. Everyday things, everyday actions, everyday relationships are all granted a new definition because the holy has once and for all become ordinary in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Connections, pg 110.