

One of the most enjoyable aspects at this time of the year for many families is that we see folks we haven't seen for some time and lots of sharing always seems to happen. Have you ever noticed that when you get together with your family and start telling stories about when you were growing up or what happened years ago, the same events sound very different as different people tell the story? Depending on who's describing it, the guy who used to live across the street was a scrooge or a saint; or moving from one town to another was either a disaster, a wonderful escape or something hardly even noticed; that trip out west was a catastrophe, a wonderful time, or not even remembered. Same event, different folks in the family, different points of view. Everyone had the same experience but recall it and describe it from quite different perspectives.

This same reality applies to the various stories in the different Gospels. Have you ever wondered why the Bible has different stories about the birth of Jesus? For example, how about the wonderful poetry of the first 18 verses of John's gospel we just heard? This is the Christmas story, the third time the Bible tells it. It's the same story we heard on Christmas Eve, the story of the manger and the shepherds and the angels. And it's the same story Matthew tells in his gospel, with Joseph's dreams, the wise men, and the flight to Egypt. But the point of view is different, and John's gospel sounds strange to ears more accustomed to hearing about crowded inns and mangers and angel choirs. That's because different folks in the family are telling the same story from different perspectives.

You see, Luke, who wrote the more familiar story we heard on Christmas Eve, was a bit of an historian. He was very concerned with getting the dates and rulers right, and with locating everything in time and space. He also may have been a gentile, and he was clearly very concerned about people who, like the gentiles, were considered outsiders. So, Luke is more interested in shepherds, who were social outcasts, than in kings. And Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary, a radical move since women were even lower on the social ladder than shepherds.

Matthew is more traditional. He was certainly a Jew and may have been a scribe. He was very concerned with making it clear that Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies as the Messiah, the King of Jews. So, shepherds didn't interest him as much as the royal wise men from the East. The child is surrounded by his peers. And Matthew paid a lot of attention to the flight to Egypt because of the parallel between the Exodus and Jesus' own return from Egypt to Israel. In addition, the more conservative Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's point of view.

Then there's John. John may have heard of the stories in Matthew and Luke, but he's not primarily an historian or a Jewish royalist. John is a theologian and a mystic. So, he writes of the *meaning* of Jesus' birth, and he writes from his theology, and from the holy imagination of his prayers. But he's still telling the same story, all three are talking about the same birth, all three are saying the same thing.

John does begin the story earlier as he reminds us that Christmas really begins where Genesis begins, in the beginning, with God in creation. So, using language reminiscent of Genesis, John begins by talking about the Word of God. The Word here is God in action, God creating, God revealing himself, the one whom the church has named the second

person of the Blessed Trinity. This Word was with God, and this Word was God. This Word was Jesus Christ.

Then John tells the Christmas story, in nine words. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That pretty much sums it up for John. He who was with God in creation, the one through whom God was revealing himself to humanity, this one became a person, became flesh, as completely human as you and I. Not God in some kind of people-suit; not a really good person who God rewarded and made special; not a super angel God created earlier and saved up for Bethlehem.

Rather, he was a person, who was the Word, who was God’s own self. These are pretty lofty words for the most down-to-earth thing that ever happened. But it’s still the Christmas story, still the story Matthew and Luke tell, the story of the birth of Jesus. In addition to telling the same story, Matthew, Luke and John also share one special way of telling it: There is one image, one symbol, and only one, that they all use to talk about the birth in Bethlehem. Can you think of what it is?

They all talk about *light*, the light of the star, the light that shone around the shepherds, the true light that enlightens every human being. These all echo Isaiah’s vision of justification shining out like the dawn, of salvation like a burning torch. Where Christ is, people who understand, talk about light. They have to, because there’s no better image of what’s going on. The light shines in the darkness, John proclaims. And somehow, we understand this, and we understand that this truth cannot be better expressed in any other words, with any other image.

In large part, I suspect we understand this because we know about darkness, we know what it’s like to live in and with darkness. Remember what it’s like to try to walk through an unfamiliar room that is completely dark, or to wake up confused in the middle of the night in someone else’s house, trying to get somewhere.

We know what it’s like when we don’t know where things are, or what we’ve just bumped into, or whether we’re going where we want to go, or if our next step will be OK, or if we will break something and make a mess. We know how easy it is to go in circles in the dark, and to get turned around, and to stub a toe and get angry and hit whatever’s handy. And we also know what it is like to live in broad daylight when darkness has no such power.

What John, and Luke and Matthew all say about Christmas is that a new light begins to shine. Gradually, quietly, but with absolute certainty, and by that light we can begin to see. By that light we can begin to see who we are and who we are created to be. For it is in the person of Jesus that what it means to be a fully human being is finally made clear. In him we see that our lives are made whole only as we live in love and care of others; in him we see that really being alive means seeing the world and our lives through the light shown through the love of God for his people and the reality of the Kingdom of God.

By that light that has come into the world we begin to see God clearly for the first time. “No one has ever seen God,” John reminds us. But God is made known to us in Jesus. This means that everything we ever thought about God, everything we had figured out, everything that we were sure we knew about God, all of this is put to the test in Jesus.

Who God is, in relationship to us, is fully revealed in Jesus. Not in one saying or one parable, or one miracle, but in all of Jesus, in his life, his ministry, his teaching, his death and resurrection; in these all together we finally have the light we need to see God.

The light of Christ, the Word made flesh, comes among us at Christmas, and we celebrate its coming into the world. God had revealed himself and his love to us in Christ. That first Christmas, the light shone, and it continues to shine. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. This is the Christmas story. This is our story. The world is full of shadows and darkness and sometimes we have trouble seeing the good. On Christmas morning God reached down and pulled a light switch. In that light we see the life God intends for us. The light still shines through all of that darkness and shows us what it looks like when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This new light that shines from Bethlehem, and from the very heart of God, empowers us with new vision to see God, ourselves, and one another in a new and different way, the way that represents truth. Amen