

**The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday after Christmas¹**

All Years



Galatians 3:23-25;4:4-7
Psalms 147:13-21
John 1:1-18

The Collect

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

¹ This Sunday takes precedence over the three Holy Days which follow Christmas Day. As necessary, the observance of one, two, or all three of them, is postponed one day.

Psalm 147:13-21 Page 804 or 805, BCP

Laudate Dominum

13 Worship the LORD, O Jerusalem;
praise your God, O Zion;

14 For he has strengthened the bars of your gates;
he has blessed your children within you.

15 He has established peace on your borders;
he satisfies you with the finest wheat.

16 He sends out his command to the earth,
and his word runs very swiftly.

17 He gives snow like wool;
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.

18 He scatters his hail like bread crumbs;
who can stand against his cold?

19 He sends forth his word and melts them;
he blows with his wind, and the waters flow.

20 He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and his judgments to Israel.

21 He has not done so to any other nation;
to them he has not revealed his judgments.
Hallelujah!

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

John 1:1-18

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.

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. (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.

SERMON

About 500 years after Jesus' time on earth, a Christian monk who rejoiced in the name "Dionysius the Areopagite" (Pseudo-Denys as he is known to scholars) asked an important question. He asked, "What can we say about God? For instance, can we say God is good, as so many bumper stickers proclaim?"

Pseudo-Denys decided that we could characterize God as good only if we first grant to ourselves the power to judge what is "good". Otherwise, to say that God can be described by the word "good" limits God to those things which mean good behavior to human beings. We would then be worshiping our own ideas about "good". Jesus Himself warned against just this sort of arrogance.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’
Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good?
No one is good but God alone.’²

Only if we believe that a human understanding of what is good is absolute and infallible can we attribute the quality “good” to God. Can we then say that God is not good? Only if we again raise human understanding to an inappropriate level. Dionysius then proceeded in like fashion to realize that all the attributes of God we so glibly attach to Him are nothing more than attempts to put God in a human-sized box. In the end, he concluded that we must submit ourselves to the mystery of God, throwing ourselves on the ground and crying out, “Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy is the Lord.”

It is this sort of submission, reached at the end of deep thought, which I see as missing from today's religious discussions. I certainly hear this group and that in-

² Mark 10.17-18

sist that they have come to understand “The Truth”, and to then elevate themselves upon that assertion the better to attack the heathens of lesser understanding, but I do not see many who humbly submit themselves to the will of God, confessing their ignorance. We are too sure of our own words to do that.

As I looked over the passages for today’s sermon, I was struck by the focus on words. I have spent forty years earning my daily bread with words. I have lined them up in sentences and sold them to book and magazine publishers and even to National Public Radio. I have spoken them into microphones connected to radio transmitters and wondered time and again if there were people on the other end listening to my words. I have spoken countless thousands of words in courts all over the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The sheer weight of the words that have passed my lips over four decades

weigh me down. As I and the other old men leave the Chapel of St. Starbuck after Vigils and Lauds, in my imagination I see the Sexton following us with his broom brushing all the words we have spoken into great piles to be hauled off to the trash.

Words. Piles of words. Important words. Trivial words. Sometimes hurtful words. Words of judgment. Words of forgiveness. I have a belly full of words. One of my friends was celebrating an anniversary. As she was telling her husband how much she loved him she told him, “Words are not enough”. She’s right. They are not. How would you express adequately the mystery of love between a husband and a wife over so long a period of time? Could she say she loved him 9.57 kilo-Joules? What IS the proper unit of measure for the love between husband and wife? What words could she use to express this great mystery which binds a man and a

woman together over a lifetime? How would her husband go about quantifying his love for her? Where is the scale upon which you can weigh love? It is a mystery. Words can't touch mysteries but we are so in love with our own words, we forget that.

That's what I want us to think about this week — words and mystery, and how the two interplay with each other because, you see, I do not think that words can ever capture anything important. I think words can only trivialize the important things of life, and lead us down roads of disappointment and misunderstanding. Words are too crude to speak of the mystery of love. They are like sifting the wind. No matter how fine your sieve, it is still too coarse.

We have to be careful to be precise here, for the words we will speak today can lead us astray as well. We have to know what words and mysteries are. As we

will speak today, “mystery” doesn’t mean a puzzle that can be examined and explained in words. That’s a strange thing for me to say, since that is exactly what we DO mean when we use the terms “Word” and “Mystery” today. To us in the 21st Century, words are utterances. Mysteries are puzzles to be solved. It was not always so. The one who seeks wisdom would do well to remember that.

The writer of the Gospel of John tells us:

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.

He is using the term “Word” as something other than the noise that comes out of our mouths virtually every waking moment of our lives. For the writer of John, “Word” is the great command of Creation. For us,

“word” means a sound or group of symbols we use to approximate something. You see how we confuse ourselves.

For us, words are a kind of fishing net we use to try to catch reality. More times than we realize, though, it is the fisherman, not the fish, who is netted. When we try to capture big concepts like “God” or “love” in our net of words it is our own thoughts which are netted, just as Pseudo-Denys told us, and we fool ourselves into thinking we understand things which we do not understand at all. It is the difference between someone describing to you a wonderful meal at a restaurant, and biting into the burger for yourself. You might decide that the description you heard really was accurate, or you might disagree, but no one would confuse the description with the burger. Except us, when the burger is the mystery of the Incarnation. Then we get all confused between the

words and the reality.

Words are both too small and too large to accurately convey anything about God. Words are too small because when we use a word to describe God we reduce God to whatever meaning we attach to the word. That meaning is going to be smaller than God, for God is greater than any thoughts about Him we can generate. Small words put God in a box, as Pseudo-Denys told us.

At the same time, words are too large because when we use a word to describe God we attach everything we understand about the word to God, so that our understanding comes to be bent out of shape by the sheer weight of the baggage our words carry. If we say that God is divine, we intend to affirm that we believe and teach that God is one in essence or nature, subsisting in himself, all sufficient in himself, invisible, incorporeal, immense, eternal, Creator of all things both visible and

invisible, the greatest good, living, quickening and preserving all things, omnipotent and supremely wise, kind and merciful, just and true³. What we actually convey is that God has something in common with the cupcakes we had over Christmas which everyone described as being “divine”. The word is too large because — without meaning to do so — we have likened God to a really good cupcake with cream icing. And a little holly leaf and berry made out of sugar on top.

Words are incapable of accurately representing the large mysteries which bring us together each Sunday because if a mystery could be represented in words, it wouldn't be a mystery. A mystery is not a puzzle to be solved by attaching the right words to it. A mystery is that which we cannot net in words, that which exhausts our human reason and leaves us on our knees crying,

3 Second Helvetic Confession

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD.”

How do we get behind the words and the images about the mystery of the stable and the birth of Jesus that have been burned into our brain since we were babies ourselves so that we may approach the mystery in the manger without using words?

“Well, what’s the big mystery?”, you might well ask. “We celebrate the birth of Jesus. That’s not too mysterious.”

I’d beg to differ. The birth of any baby is a sufficiently mysterious event that we should be in awe of it, but the birth of THIS baby... ah...that’s something entirely different. THIS baby represents God’s own Self in the world in the most vulnerable way imaginable.

We cannot net this mystery in the net of our words, for it is larger than we, and deeper. But even that which we cannot understand we can form our lives around. At

the end of the first century, the writer of the Gospel of John struggled with the same limitations of language that frustrate me today. For John, the Word of God was the creating and creative force behind everything in Creation, and that which God spoke — the Word — was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. How could we comprehend such an event lying in a manger, in a stable so long ago?

I would suggest we would be wrong to try, because we would try by applying words to it, and words are not enough. The moment of creation, when the Word of God brought all things into being, and the Incarnation, when the Command of creation entered into creation as a baby, are too large for our nets. To pull in such a catch of mystery would tear our nets and capsize our boats.

It seems to me that the coming of our Lord in so

mysterious a fashion — the creative and creating Word of God through whom all things came into being, and without whom not one thing came into being, appearing as a baby in a manger — challenges us to take one of two paths: we may have faith in our words, our limited nets of reason, or we may have faith in the story, the power, the wisdom of God who seeks us out in such a passionate way.

This is no trivial choice, church. We are so accustomed to trusting our thoughts, our words, our understanding of the world that it is disorienting and frightening to acknowledge that our vision is faulty, our mental processes inadequate to the task. At first it is like being a blind man, dependent on others to lead us. It is only later that we understand that once we were indeed blind, and now we see. It's not surprising that the process brings on a little vertigo. That's normal.

In “The Allegory of the Cave”, Plato offered a description of people living chained in constant darkness in a cave looking only at a blank wall. They could perceive things only by the shadows they cast on the walls of the cave. For such a one, reality was shadow, seen indistinctly. One day, one of them escaped the cave into the light and saw things for what they were. When he brought the good news to his companions, they thought him a fool, as the evidence of their own eyes contradicted what he said.

That is us before the mystery of the manger. When we stand before the manger in which the Word of God lies, we are faced with a choice. We can try to net the story in our inadequate words, seeing it only as shadows cast upon a wall, or we can react as the carol teaches us:

A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices!
O night divine, the night when Christ was born;

It is long past the time when we should re-evaluate our relationship with God and move away from those practices and beliefs which lead us to self-righteousness in favor of those practices and beliefs which nurture within us the need to submit to God's leadership, for Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy is the LORD. Leave your words behind, church. Enter with gladness the mystery of our faith.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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