

Christmas 1 B 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 27, 2020

John 1:1-14, 16-18 (alt.)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

There are three saints' days that immediately follow Christmas Day. December 26 is Stephen's Day. December 27 is John the Apostle's Day. And December 28 is the commemoration of the Holy Innocents. Stephen and John typically get shoved aside by Christmas and its collection of scriptures, themes, and worship services. Since today is December 27, the day of Saint John, I will try to undo the great disservice and injustice that has been done to Saint John just because his day falls on the third day of Christmas.

When the Church speaks of Saint John, we may be speaking of as many as three individuals. Our own church calls him Apostle AND Evangelist. First, the apostle, or disciple, of Jesus who is described in the gospels. Second, the evangelist, or author of the fourth gospel, which bears his name. And third, the author of the Apocalypse. If one man really did all of these things, it would be quite impressive. The apostle is described ambivalently in the gospels. He is one of the inner circle of Jesus— Peter, Andrew, James, and John— but according to Matthew and Mark, he and his brother James are guilty of wanting to be the top two, the greatest of the apostles, an egoism and a greed for power that Jesus rebukes.

The Evangelist John, in his gospel, does not reveal any egoism or thirst for earthly power. In fact, one of the hallmarks of the fourth gospel is that John the Apostle is never named. He is simply called "the beloved disciple." This is the primary evidence for the case that John the Apostle is the author of the gospel. None of the gospels tell us who wrote them. The names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are assigned by tradition and by circumstantial evidence. Whether or not the gospel writer and the apostle are the same individual, the gospel is a very sophisticated work in its literary qualities and its use of language. It is arguably the most eloquent Greek in the New Testament.

The third identity that is identified with John is the author of the book of Revelation. Unlike the gospel, the author of Revelation identifies himself as someone named John. The author of Revelation has been confined to a remote island called Patmos. And the book explicitly states that it is being written for persecuted Christianity. The consensus view is that the persecution being described in Revelation is due to the Roman Emperor Domitian, who ruled the empire from 81 to 96. The Apocalypse— Revelation— would have been written in the nineties, sixty years after Jesus was crucified under Domitian. This means that John would have been very old when he wrote Revelation. But whereas the Gospel is written in a very eloquent Greek, the Apocalypse is written in a coarse, Semitic Greek, a distinction which calls into question whether the author of the Gospel could possibly have also written the Apocalypse. Another difference between the Gospel and the Apocalypse is that the Gospel is not apocalyptic, is not concerned with eschatology, and

does not look forward to future return of Jesus Christ. Which is the whole point of Revelation.

In any event, according to a fairly well documented Christian tradition, John was a teacher to saint Polycarp, which would indicate that John did live to an old age of 90 or so, which was very unusual in those days. Of the twelve apostles, John is the only one whose liturgical color is white. All the rest are red. Peter, Andrew, Thomas, Matthew, James, and the rest all died as martyrs, according to tradition and in some cases, with historic evidence. John would have died of old age or disease, not at the hands of persecutors. According to tradition.

In the Church of England, John is often called "Saint John the Divine." You may be familiar with the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City, or any number of congregations that bear that name. "Divine" is an old fashioned word that means "theologian." Pastors obtain a professional degree called a "Master of Divinity" degree. "Saint John the Divine" means Saint John the Theologian, and he has that nickname because the fourth gospel is so full of theology. If in fact this same John wrote the Apocalypse, then the nickname would fit him as well as a seer, a man with visions, able to foresee the future. Saint John the Divine. But it is the fourth gospel that has played such a significant role in the history of Christianity and in our understanding of Jesus.

The meaning of Christmas is stated clearly by John in the fourth gospel: "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." The concept that God can become human is incarnation. The word flesh is embedded in incarnation. *Carne asada* means flesh. *Carnal* is a word that is associated with bodies and flesh. "Incarnation" means that God inhabits flesh. And we get this understanding from the fourth gospel. As important as it is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as important as it is that he was born to a virgin, as important as it is that King Herod tried to destroy him, as important as it is that he was born into the house of David, it is the fourth gospel that articulates the true meaning of Christmas: God becomes human flesh.

It would take the Church four hundred years to make sense of that. The council of Nicaea, the council of Constantinople, the council of Chalcedon. In Jesus, God and humanity have merged, have become one. This is the distinctive difference between Christianity and all other religions. Many religions believe in love and mercy and justice. Many religions believe in heaven and supernatural beings. But in only our religion does the nature of God overlap with the nature of humankind. It's a very substantive idea, a very compelling idea. It stands behind the doctrine of the Trinity. It stands behind the origins of the Christmas holidays. And it's an idea that we owe to the fourth gospel. To Saint John the Divine.

It's unfortunate that John's commemoration falls on the third day of Christmas. A day that most people in the English speaking world associate with three French hens. But if weren't for John, there were probably not even be a Christmas. Or rather than being the most important holiday alongside Easter, the birth of Jesus would be eighteenth most important day of the year. So for that, we remember John today. We appreciate John today. And we ask God to give us eyes and ears to read and to hear John's words, so that we might know God's Word. Amen.