

Christmas Day 2017. John 1.

When I was growing up my extended family had a tradition that we would spend Christmas Day at my grandmother's house. And after a really impossibly long day of my cousins, we'd cram into my grandmother's living room hip-to-hip on the couch and the floor and read the Christmas story. After it became clear that I was going to be a preacher, and probably the only preacher in the family, I started getting assigned lector-duties. And I tell ya, no one ever asked for the Christmas story from John.

We may like this passage, but it's not for the Christmas cuddlies. And I think that might be on purpose. This morning, after Santa Claus has come and caroling is mostly over and at least half of our domestic traditions have been fulfilled, we remind ourselves that something more than a nice family holiday has happened. This morning we remind ourselves that we're celebrating the birth of the one through whom the very world was created. We zoom out as far as we can go, from the great specificity of the manger in Bethlehem to the beginning—as in, before the creation of the world. The story is of the creation and salvation of the world; what's at stake is what the world and our lives within the world mean.

So we get cosmic Christmas, Christmas expressed in fundamental concepts like being and nothingness, light and dark, flesh and spirit. Like all of John, it's wordy and a little hard to follow. But I have come to love this passage at Christmas for its realism. I know, it's not a word we usually associate with high falutin philosophical theology working with the deep spiritual themes of the universe. But notice, Jesus, the light of the world, “shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” In these dark days, I am much more comforted by these words than I would be by some claim that Jesus was born as a baby and the world was instantly put right.

No, the claim is a careful one: the light shines in the dark, and the light is not overcome. The darkness remains, but the light of the world has come into the world and the dark will not defeat it. It is not the case that we will no longer see darkness; it will never be the case again that we are unable to see the light.

Or again, the Word came to what was his own and his own did not accept him. There is no claim of a triumphal march carrying all people in his wake. 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.” The story that begins at Christmas is not a story of uninterrupted victory. It involves pain and rejection and reality. In short, it involves being human.

But it also involves being made into children of God. It also involves seeing glory: a glory enfleshed and so a glory that is not a fairy tale but involves tears and blood and grief and labor. The glory that we have seen is the son of God made human so that we may be made children of God.

I like this realism and I like this call. I like it that John's postmodern dissertation on Christmas doesn't just call us to stand in awe (though it does that), but also calls us to be transformed. And as Jesus' life shows, the children of God have work to do. Being a child of God involves inviting others into God's family and sometimes getting bruised doing so. Shining a light in the darkness and pointing others towards the light. Because the darkness is still here, and the light of the world continues to shine through us. Amen.