

Chapter Three

CHRISTMASTIDE

The second season of the Christian Year is Christmastide. Some traditions begin it on Christmas Eve and others on Christmas Day. Traditionally, Christmastide is a twelve-day holiday, beginning with Christmas Day (December 25), and running through January 5 (the “Twelve Days of Christmas”). January 6 is then the celebration of the coming of the Magi, and thus initiates the season of Epiphany. In our lectionary, we are following the traditional schedule that preserves the twelve days of Christmas, and therefore sets Christmas Eve as the concluding celebration of the season of Advent.¹

In importance, Christmastide is one of the two most notable seasons of the Christian year. It is dedicated to the festival of the birth of Jesus Christ and the consequent celebration of the incarnation. Since it was first celebrated, Christmas has always been a time of joy, merriment and exuberance. Its color, consequently, is white.

There is no indication that Jesus was actually born on December 25. In fact, the likelihood is that he was born in April or in May. That can be concluded on the basis that Luke’s account is built around “shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Lk. 2:8). December 25 was much too cold and inclement for sheep to be bedding down in the fields; normally, shepherds didn’t take their flocks into the field until April.

Why, then, is December 25 the traditional day for Jesus’ birth? The selection of that date represents a political and social coup on the part of the church.² The period between December 21 (the winter solstice) and December 30 was the period of greatest celebration and worship of the sun, both in the Mithraic festivals of Egypt and in Rome. This observance reached its climax on December 25, when the “birthdays” of at least five ancient gods were celebrated. In essence, Christians decided to counter this pagan festival by worshipping the birthday of their god – Jesus, and they so overwhelmed the pagan celebrations that December 25 became a major Christian holiday (“holy day”). In 336 A.D., December 25 was changed in the Roman calendar from *Natalis Solis Invicti* (“the birth of the Sun of Righteousness”) to *Natalis Christus in Betleem Judeae* (“the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea”). Thus, the “Sun of Righteousness” was eclipsed by the “Son of Righteousness”!

¹ In the medieval church, all twelve days of Christmas were celebrated as a single feast, with only work necessary to preserve life being done. The Twelve Days of Christmas are:

- Dec. 25 – Christmas Day
- 26 – St. Stephens’ Day
- 27 – St. John’s Day
- 28 – Holy Innocents Day
- 31 – Watch Night
- Jan. 1 – Jesus’ Circumcision
- 5 – Epiphany Eve

The remaining days would be feast days or, according to the calendar, the First and Second Sundays of Christmas.

² F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 277-278; George Gibson, *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 87-98.

By the latter part of the 4th century, the name given to December 25 was “Christ’s Mass”, stressing the idea that this was a day for consecrating the birth of Jesus in worship and in the celebration of the Eucharist. As early as the 5th century, Christmas music and “carols”, liturgies and customs began to be developed. The name for December 25 evolved into “Christmas” by the eleventh century.

Whereas Christmas, as a religious holy day, concentrated upon the worship of the Christ Child, much of the festivals of the formerly pagan solstice carried over into the Christian celebration of Christmas. Thus, for example, the giving of gifts was initially part of the Roman celebration of the solstice. Germany contributed the evergreen tree as a symbol of everlasting life, and its decorations come from the hanging of the body parts of conquered enemies upon these trees. The Druids gave their sacred mistletoe, under which the ill received the kiss of healing from a young virgin. The holly, representing the crown of thorns with drops of blood, came from England. The Yule log, receiving into its flames the hatreds and distrusts of the past year, came from Scandinavia, along with candles burning in the windows to light the way of the Christ child. So one can say that, whereas early Christianity succeeded at “baptizing” the pagan holidays into the worship of Christ, the pagans “re-baptized” Christmas by diverting it into play, sport and finally into commercialism.

The two major events of the Christian Year – Christmas and Easter – are the celebrations around which Christendom is centered. One marks the birth of our Lord, the other his resurrection. One celebrates the incarnation of our God upon the earth; the other celebrates our atonement and rebirth through his death and resurrection. Both celebrate the transformational love of God for humanity, as God acts to give his son for the redemption and liberation of the world.

Christmas Dawn, December 25

Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Luke 2:8-20; Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:8-20. We are all familiar with the Christmas story, as told by Luke – perhaps, too familiar because its very familiarity lulls us to rest in its beauty while no longer hearing the shocking truth of its presentation.³ We tend to hear the Christmas story within a sentimentalized understanding of the holiday that evokes warm memories of Santa Claus, White Christmases and chestnuts roasting on an open fire! What we need to rediscover, however, is that Luke’s telling of the birth of Jesus is a carefully crafted story that fits like a glove the dominant theme of that Gospel – that Jesus came to proclaim and to inaugurate the Jubilee of Israel and for the world.

³ Much of the commentary on Luke 2:8-20 that is given here is the same as that given on Luke 2:1-16 that appears in the Christmas Eve selections. The only difference is this commentary’s last several paragraphs when I examine vs. 16-20 which are not considered in the December 24 Gospel lesson. The reason for continuing the same commentary into Christmas Dawn is that I am assuming that most churches that would publicly celebrate Christmas Eve in a nighttime service would not also celebrate Christmas Dawn; thus, such repetition increases the likelihood that this commentary on the Christmas Story will be considered.

The primary theme of Luke is Jesus' reclaiming and acting out the Jubilee of God, and thereby bringing a great reversal to the economic, political and spiritual life of Israel and of the world. Jesus came proclaiming that God's true Jubilee was coming to both Israel and the world through his person and ministry (Luke 4:17-18).

The Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune in which every fifty years the land of Israel was to lie fallow, all debts were to be cancelled, all slaves were to be set free and each family was to regain possession of their ancestral land (Lev. 25:8-55). When it was observed, Jubilee was designed so that wealth couldn't accumulate and power accrue in the hands of an elite few, but would rather be redistributed so that all the people of Israel would live in justice, with an equitable share of the wealth, so that poverty would be eliminated and all would live in relationship with God. It was God's way of remaking Israel into the world as God intended it to be. But Jubilee had not been observed in its entirety for at least 400 years, and Israel consequently lived in great poverty with only a select few living in wealth, power and in control of the nation's religious institution.

Thus, the primary theme of the Gospel of Luke is that Jesus has come to bring God's society back to Israel and Israel back to God. He will accomplish this by bringing about a great reversal in the economic, political and spiritual life of the nation. That great reversal would occur through Israel fully embracing the Jubilee. This reversal would be attempted through Jesus' intervention as Messiah – through his ministry, his empowering of the poor and marginalized, his confronting of the powerful representatives of the systems, their rejection of him, and his consequent suffering, death and resurrection. If the powerful would embrace that Jubilee, then Israel would return to being God's kingdom. If they did not, then God would create a new people through Jesus that would be a Jubilee people (Acts 2:14-47). That theme is "overtured" through Luke's Christmas story.

Luke's Christmas story begins with the angel Gabriel being sent to Nazareth to tell a 14-year-old virgin that she is about to become pregnant without having had sexual intercourse with a man – and that her baby "will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (1:32).

This story is filled with astounding Jubilee themes of liberation. First, the angel speaks to a woman about this awesome event – not to a man. Second, she is not even a mature woman, but a mere girl – just entering adolescence and still a virgin. Third, she is given the privilege and right to refuse the angel's proposal – that is the honor bestowed upon her. But in faith believing, she accepts it. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38).

Mary sings a hymn of praise to God in her visit with her cousin Elizabeth, who is also experiencing a miracle pregnancy. We tend to read the Magnificat (1:46-55), concentrating on its opening lines because those lines center on God's graciousness in selecting Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. But note the last lines of the Magnificat:

"The Mighty One . . . has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the

lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (1:51-55).

Here is the Jubilee reversal of fortune, voiced by a pregnant peasant girl. In the birth of her son, the powerful are to be brought low, the oppressed free from tyranny, the wealthy emptied, the destitute “filled with good things”. The Upside-Down Kingdom is being proclaimed through Mary’s song!

The story then moves to Jesus’ birth. Government tyranny forces Jesus’ pregnant mother and his stepfather to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the last days of Mary’s pregnancy. There, they find no room and so must bed down in a stable as Mary begins her labor. The savior of the world is wrapped in “swaddling cloths” and laid in a manger. It is a romantic picture, but it was not a romantic reality. Luke means to paint as harsh a picture as possible. It is shepherds, it is women and orphans, it is the destitute, it is the expendables, the untouchables who bed down in a stable. It is such poor people whose babies are born there and who are laid in a manger, wrapped with whatever cloth might be at hand. Jesus, the king of the world, is being born as the lowliest of peasants. The cognitive dissonance of this story must have struck the first Christians with unbelievable force.

Then comes the high point of the Christmas story. Angels appear to shepherds watching their flocks in the fields and proclaim “good news of great joy” for “born this day in the city of David is a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord”. The angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!” The shepherds, obviously, leave their flocks and run to the stable to view their Messiah (Luke 2:8-16).

The two important players in this portion of Luke’s birth narrative are the shepherds and the angels. These two actors are crucial for grasping the Jubilee theme. Shepherds of Jesus’ day were considered among the expendables of society; they were located near the bottom of the power scale, ranked only above lepers. Yet it is to shepherds that the angel appears to announce the birth of the one who will turn the kingdom upside-down. They are to be understood as standing in contrast to the Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, the governor who had ordered the census. The high-and-mighty have unintentionally brought the Son of David to David’s city for his coronation (birth). But the angels are appearing to the lowest of the low, announcing to them the good news of the coming of the Messiah. Good news comes to peasants; it doesn’t come to the powerful. The words of Mary’s Magnificat, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” is being literally fulfilled through the birth of this baby!

The angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” And whom does God favor? Shepherds. A peasant mother. A carpenter father. Ox and ass, sheep and doves. The powerful are being ignored, and the lowly given access to the liberator king. And Jubilee is being literally initiated in front of our eyes!

The story now draws to its close. “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and

Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (2:15-20).

In ancient Israel, when a baby boy was born, the relatives and friends of the parents would gather outside the newborn’s house and sing psalms of praise to God. But Mary and Joseph had been torn away from their families because of the edict of the powerful and had been forced to travel the 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered in a Roman census. Thus, there were no relatives or friends to welcome with traditional psalms of praise the baby born to Mary. So what did God do? God provided angels both to announce the birth and to sing praise to God for the coming of this boy who would turn the world upside-down. And since relatives and friends could not gather to welcome the baby, God chose the lowest of the low, shepherds, to accompany Jesus’ birth. It was that multitude of the angels who made that hillside (and not the Jerusalem Temple) the meeting place for God and humanity, and the common response of the highest of godly beings (angels) and of the lowest and most oppressed of humans (shepherds) is the response of praise!

The praise of the angels ends. And the shepherds follow the angel’s instructions, traveling to nearby Bethlehem to visit the Christ child. There, they worship and praise him. But having had the angels’ message confirmed in their visit with the infant Jesus, what would now be the response of both shepherds and of Mary (note that Luke presents no evidence of the response of Joseph – he is not a key player to Luke, even though that goes against all protocol in first-century Israel)?

The shepherds “found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger”, they “made known what had been told them about the child” (and likely what they had experienced in meeting him), and they “returned (to their sheep) glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen”. They found Jesus, returned to their work worshipping God, and shared what they had heard and seen. The lives of these shepherds had been profoundly impacted by their experience that night. They worshipped God in Jesus. They were excited enough about what they had seen, especially when they made the inevitable connections that any Jew contemporaneous with Mary and Joseph would have made about the coming of the Messiah to bring about Jubilee, that they told others about it and thus became the first evangelists in the Gospel of Luke. And the dull drudgery of their work had been transformed by this visit to a stable, so that even that work was filled with worship.

The normative word used by Luke for the response of the shepherds to this revelation was “amazed”. They were amazed, and all who heard about it were amazed! But what did Luke mean by the use of that word?

Luke uses the words “amazed” or “amazement” throughout his Gospel (e.g., 1:21, 63-66; 2:33; 4:22; 8:25; 9:43; 11:14; 24:12, 41). It is the way that the people – and especially the peasants – responded either to Jesus or to God’s action (as in this story). It is a response of awe at the unanticipated actions of God or of Jesus. But it is not to be equated with faith. One can be “amazed” without “believing”. Thus, the crowds who heard the shepherds and perhaps even the

shepherds themselves responded to God's actions through the angels and at the manger with an awe and wonder that could manifest itself in both thanking and praising God. But that should not be read as meaning that people either understood the extraordinary action that God was doing that night nor the people's willingness to unquestioningly embrace that action to transform the people and systems of Israel and of the world.

Mary's response was profoundly different. Luke tells us that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart". There are those experiences in life so profound that one must both sit in awe before them and allow the implications of that action to slowly permeate one's consciousness and even one's spirituality. It is a theme that Luke often visits – not just with Jesus' mother but with Jesus himself who not only must go off into the desert to reflect upon his call (4:1-13) and often for prayer (19:41-44; 22:39-46), and is reflected in another Mary, who chooses "the better part" of sitting in silence at the feet of Jesus and learning from him, rather than helping to fix a meal (10:38-42). It is the recognition that no depth of faith comes quickly but silently, in the stilling of the heart, and in being open and receptive to the amazing ways that God is at work in the world and through one joining in God's transformation of the world.

Isaiah 62:6-12 is all about God doing a new thing. There are many metaphors used in this passage and the section of chapter 62 that precedes it to express that "new thing" – God defeating an enemy and keeping the people secure (62:6-9), the building of a new highway (vs. 10), God building a new city (vss. 11-12), the marriage of a bride and groom (vss. 4-5), the nation receiving a new name (vss. 2-4). This plethora of metaphors is all used to make one essential point: God is about to act in a thoroughly unpredictable way to accomplish for humanity (and for Israel) what only God can do.

To place this passage into context, one needs to remember that Israel had been ignominiously conquered by Babylonia in 597 BCE and her "City of God" was destroyed, its temple leveled to the ground, its people abandoned, and its leaders marched off into exile through Babylonian captivity. It seemed like the very end of Israel and of God's experiment to build a holy people dedicated to realizing God's shalom community upon the earth.

But now, through this prophet, God is delivering a new promise to this defeated and broken people. God will vindicate the nation, will restore its people from exile and rebuild Jerusalem (vss. 1-2). Through giving them "a new name", God will declare them a new creation, living an existence that was not a previous option. He, in fact, would become groom to them, an innocent bride (vss. 4-5). But God's most far-reaching promise is reserved for the end of this chapter.

"Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind Yahweh, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. Yahweh has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give you grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored; but those who garner it shall eat it and praise Yahweh, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts" (62:6-9).

The image is of guards standing at their post upon the battlements of a great city, sweeping the horizon for signs of a great procession coming their way. And then they see it, and raise the cry that the exiles are returning from Babylon. The gates of the city are thrown open and its people pour forth to welcome the returning former captives.

As the exiles approach their home town gates, the prophet declares two things. First, he declares that they are returning to (and will contribute toward building) a new society where wealth will be shared, justice will be accorded to all and people will truly live in healing relationship with God and each other. God's promise given to the people is, "I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored, but those who garner it shall eat it and praise Yahweh, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts" (vss. 8-9). This sentiment reminds us of the words used just a few chapters later by Isaiah, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat" (65:21-22). This new society that God is shaping out of exiles and the resident poor will be a sharing society in which each person will live in equity with everyone else.

Second, the prophet states that the returning exiles are welcomed with joy. Those former captives are streaming past the gates and into the city, being welcomed by the people with joyous hugs and embraces. And waiting for these returning exiles is an abundant banquet, with tables piled high with the bounty of the earth and flagons of wine full and waiting to be drained. The exiles have returned, and a new day is dawning!

"Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. Yahweh has proclaimed to the end of the earth: 'Say to daughter Zion, See your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.' They shall be called, "The Holy People, the Redeemed of Yahweh"; and you shall be called "Sought out, A City Not Forsaken"" (62:10-12).

The prophet concludes this prophecy in the most unique way. The returning exiles parade triumphantly into the city. But they do not parade as conquerors of the Babylonians, for they did not conquer. Instead, they were rescued. The true conqueror, using the vehicle of Cyrus of Persia, is Yahweh. So Yahweh parades into the city as conquering king, arriving with the exiles. It is God's arrival that brings salvation to the people and recompenses the exile for their torment. Therefore, the arriving exiles can be given the new name, "the Holy People, the Redeemed of Yahweh". And the welcoming people who had been abandoned by the exile of those now returning, and who had been left to their own devices, can now be named by God "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken". This is the new work that God has done – not only a work of release from captivity, not only the building of a new economic, political and religious society of shared resources, justice and relationship with God, but also a people re-named as those chosen and redeemed by God!

Psalm 97 praises God for the glory of God's reign. The psalm is divided into two sections, the first being a description of God's reign upon the earth (97:1-9), and the second section dealing with God's expectations for those who bear allegiance to him (97:10-12).

It begins, "Yahweh is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. His lightnings light up the world, the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Master of the world, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory. All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him. Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments, O God. For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods" (97:1-9).

This psalm is centered upon giving glory and praise to God's reign upon the earth. It deals with the creative power of God at work upon the world ("his lightnings light up the world – i.e., storms and fire; "the earth sees and trembles" – i.e., earthquakes; "the mountains melt like wax" – i.e., volcanic eruptions). But it also deals with God's work within the nation as that nation engages its political, economic and religious life ("let the coastlands be glad" – i.e., pagan nations along the coast should revere Yahweh; "righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne" – i.e., the nation and its people is judged according to whether it is acting both justly and mercifully toward the poor, powerless and marginalized; "all the peoples behold his glory" – i.e., the worship of the nations must be centered on Yahweh; "all gods bow down before him" – i.e., Israel's commitment to Yahweh should dominate the earth). The psalm's emphasis is on what God has done for Israel, particularly in its wilderness wanderings and in its conquering of the Promised Land. It does not mention the Torah explicitly, but its presentation of God's expectations for Israel and for the world conform with the demands of justice and the building of public life (the economics, politics and religion of the people) that permeates Torah!

The psalm ends with an expected response from Israel for God's choosing of that nation as God's vehicle for the transformation of the world into God's ideal. "Yahweh loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked. Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in Yahweh, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name" (97:10-12).

When God comes to the earth, the Psalmist is declaring in this section of Psalm 97, those who are just in their actions and committed to the realization of God's society upon earth have nothing to fear! Instead, they have much to gain in Yahweh acting to bring God's power and love to the earth. Thus, it will be the humble, the poor, the minimized, the ostracized, the powerless who will most welcome his coming, for they will have the least to lose. On the other hand, those who are powerful, who rule, who shape a society will be most threatened, for both their position and their control will be at risk as God establishes his reign upon the earth. So, the Psalmist declares, God's coming will not be good news to everyone, but only to those "who hate evil". For such as these, God will "guard the lives of his faithful and rescue them from the hand of the wicked"! "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth shalom among those who God favors" (Luke 2:14)!

Titus 3:4-7 is the Epistle lesson for Christmas Dawn. It reads, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”

Although this passage in no way alludes to the dominant theme of Christmas Dawn (Jesus Christ is born), this epistle lesson richly deserves to be a part of the Christmas lectionary. It reminds us of two realities. The first is its extremely explicit statement about the strategic role of the Holy Spirit. The angel had announced to the shepherds, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). The Savior. The Messiah (or anointed one). The Lord. But how do we know that this little baby is Savior, Messiah, Lord? And how do we make his saviorship (in the Bible, an economic term), Messiahship (a political term) and Lordship (an all-encompassing, spiritual term) alive in our economic, political and spiritual realities?

We experience in our own lives and in our society the miracle of that Christmas dawn only through the power of the Holy Spirit! “When God our Savior appeared, he saved us according to his mercy through the Holy Spirit”. It is the Holy Spirit who irresistibly woos us to Christ, the Holy Spirit who places Jesus’ call before us, the Spirit who does the miracle of transformation in us (justification), and the Spirit who dedicates us to living our lives working for Christ and His Kingdom! The work of the Holy Spirit is inextricably bound up in the work of God the Father and God the Son as symbolized in that first Christmas dawn. And that work continues to go on today – both in us and through us as we act out our faith by working for the transformation of the world into the world as God intended it to be.

Merry Christmas!

Christmas Day, December 25

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-12

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” (John 1:1-5).

With these dramatic words, the Gospel of John begins its Christmas story. But unlike Matthew and Luke that tells us of the birth of Christ, John tells us about creation itself – and Jesus’ relationship to that creation.

“In the beginning was the Word”. The Gospel of John opens with identical words to Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning”. Through the Hebrew creation story runs a profound theme, repeated eight times (Gen. 1:3-6 and 7, 9, 11, 14-15, 20-21, 24 and 26-30). That theme is “And God said . . . And it was so.”

Genesis tells us that God *spoke* the world into existence. So, John is declaring the same truth. The Word – in Greek, *logos*, in Hebrew *dabar* – is not just *a* word spoken by human beings. It is *the* word, for the *dabar* or *logos* is the conduit by which Yahweh invades humanity and writes sacred history into our history. The *logos* of God *is* God, the voice of God speaking the creation into life. Without the Word, there is no world!

For whom is this Word intended? The Word, John is telling us, is intended for the world. The Greek word used here for “world” is “cosmos”. The cosmos is not simply the geographical world – our sphere. The cosmos, to the Greeks, was the entire created order, the universe. The Word, John tells us, has entered the “cosmos” which God created, bringing to that cosmos “life”, “light” and “power”.

But how did the cosmos and its people respond? “The *cosmos* did not *know* him.” “His own *people* did not *accept* him.” Rejection of the Word (and therefore of God) occurred at two levels – societally (i.e., the cosmos) and individually (i.e., people). The “cosmos” and its “people” had refused to come into an intimate relationship with its creator because “darkness” had kept it and its people from the “light”.

However, such rejection of the Word is not universal. “But to all who received (the Word), . . . he gave power to become children of God” (1:12). There are those who have responded to the Word and have become right with God. But how do they do that, John asks?

God’s people are to be shaped around their embracing of the free gift of God’s redemptive love (1:13), and making that “amazing grace” the foundation for their life together. God’s “shalom”, the “cosmos” as God intended it to be will come into existence through “all who received him, who believed in his name” and who therefore create together a new community, an alternative society built upon God’s love and grace.

The magnificent prologue of the Gospel of John now rushes toward its climax, as it gives to the reader the essential theme of the remainder of the Gospel of John.

“*The Word became flesh*”. The Word – the *dabar* of God, the *logos* of God, has become an actual, living human being. The Word “lives” among us within a human being! The Son of God, the enfleshment of the “Word”, is journeying through the human experience, John is telling us, as the personification of “grace and truth”.

But what does John mean by “grace and truth”? What John is doing here is using two Greek words to capture the essence of one Hebrew word – *chesedh*. “*Chesedh*” is the depth of God’s love expressed towards us, a love that accepts us as we are and yet calls us to become all that we have the potential that God has created us to be. And now John is telling us that God has “tabernacled” (the actual meaning of the Greek) among us so that we might become God’s

people as we live out “*chesedh*” in both our private and public lives and in the very ways we carry out the political, economic and religious functions of our society.

Now the Prologue reaches its climax. It names the “Word”. The “father’s only son, full of grace and truth” is Jesus Christ. “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

God’s “*chesedh*” is not going to come to humanity and the “cosmos” any longer through “Moses” (that is, the Jewish political, economic and religious system). The Law created by God to incarnate God in humanity’s structures has become the exact opposite, for it has become the oppressive system of the first century that is designed to maintain power for the few while holding the populace in economic, political and religious slavery. The “Law” has become so exploitive and dominating that it is beyond redemption.

But “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”. God has had to find another way. And that way is Jesus!

What John is proposing here is radically revolutionary. Is he right? The remainder of the Gospel According to St. John is his effort to demonstrate through the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth the authenticity of what he has here proposed. And it is to demonstrate that authenticity against the landscape of the horrendous oppression of the Jewish and Roman systems! This is the magnificent Christmas story of the Gospel of St. John.

Isaiah 52:7-10. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, rings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns”” (Isa. 52:7).

In a passage that would later be echoed by Paul in his moving description of the preachers of the early church spreading the gospel (Rom. 10:15), that would over a millennium later enter the Anglican liturgy and would then become the text of one of Handel’s best known arias in *The Messiah*, the prophet tells us of the most beautiful sight in the world – the feet of a messenger running with overwhelmingly good news.

This rich Old Testament lesson begins with the description of a messenger running from the scene of a battle with the good news that the general and ruler, Yahweh, has won against the foes of darkness! As he runs, shouting the good news at the top of his voice, the watchmen of Jerusalem, standing guard over the rubble of its walls destroyed by the enemy hear his cry, and respond with a shout of triumph (vs. 8). The people hear the joy of the guards, and so join in with a riotous triumphant shout of victory and of rejoicing “for the Lord has comforted his people” with the news of triumph.

Then, suddenly, behind the shouting, ecstatic messenger comes God himself on his great steed, leading the conquering army. God has returned to the destroyed and devastated city. And he has returned as both redeemer (vs. 9) and liberator (vs. 10) of Israel. God has brought

spiritual salvation to his people (vs. 9), and political and economic deliverance (vs. 10).⁴ But that liberation is not for Israel alone, the prophet declares. It is so “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (vs. 10).

The striking poem that begins the Gospel of John and introduces Christ as the Word and Light of the world is not the first statement in scripture that presents God as political, economic and spiritual liberator and savior for the entire world (that is, “to all who received him, who believed in his name”). What would someday become the magnificent prologue of the Gospel of John initially is given voice in this magnificent prophecy of Isaiah who sees God coming in human flesh to his people, setting them free from the tyranny that had previously oppressed them.

Psalm 98 seems to be written with our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 52, in mind. That passage described a messenger running from the field of battle with the good news that God, that nation’s authentic king, has conquered the enemy. His message is followed by the blast of the trumpet, and the king himself approaches the city in triumphal procession. The city’s people, of course, go wild with joy, as they praise both their victory as a nation and their God!

This psalm follows a similar pattern to Isaiah 52. It is the words of praise and adoration sung by many upon God’s triumphal procession into their city. It is the actual psalm that would be sung. “O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God” (98:1, 3)!

Actually, there are three dimensions of praise presented in Psalm 98. There is, first of all, the praise that human beings, both as individuals and as a people give to God (vv. 1-3). God’s deliverance is perceived by the people as being a “new thing” deserving of a “new song”. And that “new thing” that God has done is comprehensive in scope. God has acted to bring about a spiritual transformation through his mighty act (“he has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness”), but that transformation is also political (“he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations”) and military in nature (“his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory”). Thus, the great work that God has done in liberating his people has not solely been individualistic (although it has included this dimension of redemption), but is corporate and social as well, transforming the nation’s political and military agenda as well as its spirituality.

But Psalm 98 presents God’s work of human transformation not only as being praised by the Jewish people and nation (vs. 1-3). It is also praised by all the peoples of the earth. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth: break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord” (vss. 4-6).

⁴ The political and economic liberation is expressed in the phrase, “Yahweh has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations”. To “bare one’s arm” was a poetic way of expressing a righteous conqueror who, in his conquest, was righting the political and economic conditions of repression that the nation had earlier faced (cf. Isa. 51:9-11).

By stating that the “joyful noise that is to be made to the Lord” is to be undertaken by “all the earth”, the psalmist is indicating that this transformation that God is doing is not for Israel alone, but is intended for the whole world. This is clearly stated in verse 3: “all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God”. Thus, what the Psalmist is presenting here is that God’s salvific work is neither exclusively spiritual nor is it exclusively intended for Israel. Rather, it is “good news of great joy for all the people” bringing shalom “among those whom God favors.”

The third level of praise moves beyond individuals, the people, Israel or even all the nations of the earth. The praise of God for God’s transformative work in our lives and in our societies spiritually, politically and militarily is also to be taken up by nature itself. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (vss. 7-9).

As is particularly intimated in our Gospel lesson for today, even creation itself praises God. Ancient Israelite thinking, like that of the nations around them, envisioned the world set upon chaos (“the roaring of the sea”) that seeks to deny or overthrow God’s dominion. But even chaos itself recognizes the great victory that has been won by God, so that just as humans have been redeemed and civilizations transformed politically, economically and socially by God’s saving work, so even nature is made new again as it becomes the world of shalom that God intended it to be.

Thus, the Psalm ends, “God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity”. The world itself – both the natural world and the human-built world – will be governed with *tsedeq* (translated “righteousness”), the Psalmist tells us. And the people will be governed with *mesharim* (translated “equity” or “uprightness”). The nations (and even nature) will be governed by the conquering monarch-God in the new world God is creating, and they will be governed with compassionate and just treatment toward the poor (the meaning of the word *tsedeq*).⁵ And the people will be governed by God with *mesharim* or with economic equity, so that everyone shares wealth and “there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). This is the kind of kingdom God is creating as he conquers the forces of chaos and evil, and this is the kind of world in which he invites those who are called by him to live.

Hebrews 1:1-12. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

This Epistle Lesson for Christmas Day is the logical successor to Isaiah’s and the Psalmist’s image of the redeeming, liberating God returning in triumph and of John’s poetic

⁵ The Hebrew word *tsedeq* didn’t mean what the English word “righteousness” means. “Righteousness” has a sense of acting in a morally right way; *tsedeq*, on the other hand, is always used of nations and people in acting ethically and compassionately toward the poor.

prologue of the creating Word of God being made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth to become redeemer and liberator of the world. The unknown author of Hebrews tells us that God did reveal himself and his saving work to and through the prophets of the past. But now, he has acted in a unique and a definitive way through God's Son. And with that revelation of the Son, the world has moved from an era of preparation to the era of fulfillment.

Hebrews then goes on to make seven affirmations about the Son – Jesus Christ. And those seven affirmations, considered together, present one of the clearest affirmations of the deity of Christ that appears in the Bible. The affirmations are as follows:

1. Jesus is “the heir of all things” (vs. 2). That is, he is the predicted, anticipated messianic Son.
2. Jesus is the creator of the “worlds” (not just this planet, and not just the solar system, but the entire universe); as the Word, Jesus is the means through which God created the cosmos (vs. 2).
3. Jesus is the radiant “Light” (vs. 2) of God (vs. 2; cf. John 8:12, 9:5).
4. Jesus is the exact representation of God upon the earth (vs. 3), the Greek word used for “exact imprint” being the word for a newly-minted coin taken from its die.
5. Jesus is the one who sustains the world (vs. 3).
6. Jesus is the one who redeems the world from its sin (vs. 3).
7. Jesus is the one who has taken his throne as co-regent at God's right hand and now rules the world as the representative of God (vs. 3).

This is whom God brought to earth as a little baby lying in a manger in a peasant stable in an obscure province of the Roman Empire, watched over by a teen-age mother, an awe-filled father, shepherds among Israel's lowest of the low and the cattle of the field. This is the miracle of redemption, of liberation, of transformation for “those whom God favors” and for the society that they would be called to build (Luke 2:1-14).

“He comes, a Child, from realms on high, He comes the heavens adoring; He comes to earth to live and die, A broken race restoring. Although the King of kings is He, He comes in deep humility; His people to deliver, And reign for us forever”⁶

First Sunday after Christmas Day

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40; Galatians 4:4-7

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 is the end of one chapter of the book of Isaiah and the beginning of the next. But these two chapters are not meant to stand alone, but to be of one cloth, the second reinforcing and further developing the argument of the first.

⁶ Joseph Barlowe, “Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light”, stanza two. *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986), hymn 129.

The prophet begins by referring to himself, comparing himself to a bride who is being given in marriage to Israel's bridegroom, Yahweh. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garment of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (61:10-11).

The prophet sees himself (at least in this context) as the Suffering Servant about whom he wrote in Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. He begins today's chapter with a description of what he as the first of several of God's anointed ones are called to do: "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoner; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (61:1-2). This passage, of course, was used by Jesus 700 years later in his declaration of his mission in Luke 4:18-19. The anointed one's task is threefold: he is to declare to Israel the arrival of God's promised salvation, to minister to the poor and the oppressed, and to proclaim that Jubilee has come upon the land.

In today's Old Testament lesson, the prophet describes himself as a bride about to be given in marriage to Yahweh, who is to be his groom. As a bride is decked in the finest clothes her family can afford, so the prophet is to be decked in "the garments of salvation" and "the robe of righteousness", thus bringing by the prophet's very presence wholeness (the Hebrew meaning of the word "salvation") and the ethics of justice (the Hebrew meaning of the word "righteousness") upon the people. This is how the bride, by her very presence, becomes the servant who heals her nation and enables them to act both justly toward all its citizens and toward all the other nations of the world. Thus, by assuming this role of "bride" or "Suffering Servant", the prophet becomes the planter and caretaker of a garden of Yahweh's "righteousness and praise" that will "spring up before all the nations".

Then, at the beginning of chapter 62, the author of this prophecy suddenly changes his identification of the Suffering Servant. "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God" (62:1-3).

Suddenly, it is Israel who is the bride! The prophet passes on his role of Suffering Servant to Israel. It is Zion who is now recognized as the beloved of God. The marital imagery is a symbol frequently used by Isaiah for Israel (cf. 49:18; 52:1; 54:11-12; 62:4-5). And here he resorts to it once again. It is Israel who is declared God's beloved, God's chosen – and the prophet recedes into the background.

In Isaiah 62, the prophet tells us three things about Israel as it becomes the bride. First, she is vindicated by God. The nation and holy city destroyed by Babylon in 587 BCE (and therefore, seeming to be rejected by God) is restored by God to her former place among the pivotal cities of the world, for she will take upon herself God's clothing of "salvation" and

“righteousness” – of “wholeness” and “justice”, becoming as a nation that which God calls all nations to be.

Second, “You, Israel, shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give you.” Just as a bride, when she is wed, changes her name to that of her husband, so Israel will change its name to that of bride of Yahweh. She will take on the name – and consequently the very essence of her Lord and Master. In accepting God’s design for her national life – politically, economically, socially, spiritually – she will become “a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of her God”. In becoming God’s “Servant”, she becomes God’s liberated and just one!

Third, “the nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory”. Just as the prophet as Suffering Servant was witness to Israel, so Israel, in accepting the role of becoming the bride of Yahweh will become witness to all the nations of the world. They will see in her, and in the way she chooses to live her political, economic and religious life, a model of what it means to be a nation and a people under God!

But why would this passage be chosen to be the Old Testament lesson for the First Sunday in Christmastide? Perhaps it is because that as the prophet proved an inadequate Suffering Servant and passed on that calling to Israel, the political, economic and religious powers of Israel had not kept their marriage vows to God and thus the privilege and obligation of being the Suffering Servant was now about to pass on to a newborn baby lying in a manger!

Psalm 148. This psalm is, in my opinion, one of the finest of the psalms of praise – and is most fittingly selected for this festival time of the year, the first Sunday after Christmas. It begins:

“Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts” (148:1-2)!

The Psalmist, following the same identical pattern set in verse two, then goes through a list of all that should praise God – sun, moon, stars, highest heavens, waters above the heavens, the earth, sea monsters, the deeps of the ocean, fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind (i.e., the elements), mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things (that is, insects and reptiles), birds, kings, the people, princes, rulers, young men and women, old people.

In this naming of the elements one can imagine, the Psalmist has followed an intriguing order. First, heavenly beings praise the Lord (vs. 2), reminding us of the angel chorus (the highest of the high) appearing to the shepherds (the lowest of the low) and giving glory to God for the birth of Jesus. Second, the universe praises the Lord, in that, in its sheer scale, grandeur, expanse of time and mystery, it testifies to the mind-boggling creative energy of God (vss. 3-6). Third, the earth, with its magnificent geology, its seasons, its elements and its fecundity praises God by its very act of simply being (vss. 7-9).

Fourth, the living creatures – wild animals, domesticated animals, reptiles, insects, birds – all praise the Lord by simply being what they were created to be (vs. 10). And, finally, all

humanity both unintentionally and intentionally praises the Lord (vss. 11-14). The kings “and all rulers of the earth”, along with their people unintentionally praise the Lord in that they are subject to the will of the Lord even though they do not acknowledge his authority (cf. Pss. 2, 82; Isa. 10:5-19; 31:1-3). But also God’s chosen people, Israel, intentionally and proactively praise the Lord – both male and female, young and old, those who can reproduce (the Hebrew translated “male and female” [*bakhurim* and *betulot*] means men and women capable of reproduction) and all who cannot reproduce (“young” and “old”) – whoever you are and whatever your age – praise the Lord!

In other words, what the Psalmist is declaring is that everything in the universe, whether intelligent or not, animate or inanimate, cognizant of God’s work or oblivious to God’s creative power – everything, by its very existence, gives praise to its creator! And they ultimately give praise to the Lord because “(God) has raised up a horn for his people”. For God has moved beyond the creation of the cosmos to the historical redemption of humanity, and has done so through “his people” and the “horn” from among them that “he has raised up”.

God has chosen one people to be his people, not in order to be exclusive but to be a means of redemption and liberation to the world. And the vehicle by which Israel acts for the redemption and liberation of the world is through its “horn” (cf. Ps. 89:17, 24, 38) – a ruler called forth by God who will be Israel’s strength and transformation which he will pass to the people! This work of redemption and liberation, therefore, is the final reason that God is to be praised. The creation itself, in all of its complexity, captures our awe for God’s capacity. But God’s work of liberation is what captures our loyalty, love and respect, for it provides for us a “horn” that both sets us free and enables us to become freedom to the rest of the world.

“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord” (148:13-14)!

Luke 2:22-40 continues a theme introduced in the earlier accounts of Luke dealing with the miraculous conception of John the Baptist and of Jesus and of Jesus’ birth. That theme is the intriguing interplay of the actions of the “Powers that Be”, the everyday and common actions of the peasants, and the miraculous work of God impacting both.

The actions of the “Powers That Be” are captured, in the first chapter of Luke, in the doubting but obedient response of the priest, Zechariah in regards to God’s promise of the birth of John. It is important to keep in mind that Zechariah is a part of the religious “system” of Israel, yet he is faithful to God’s call to him rather than seeking his own power. The common actions are the pregnancy of both Anna (Zechariah’s wife) and Mary (Joseph’s betrothed), and Mary’s visit to Anna. The miraculous was the conception of both babies by the intervention of God as integral steps of God’s action for the transformation of the world, as well as Elizabeth’s insight regarding the conception of Jesus, Mary’s song of praise and Zechariah’s prophecy.

In the second chapter, the three themes continue. The political system (in this case, Rome, demonstrates its use of unilateral power by placing an impossible demand upon the

people by requiring a census and in doing so, unwittingly prepares the stage for the birth of Jesus in conformity to Hebrew prophecy. The common people, Mary and Joseph, do as they are commanded, travel to Bethlehem, are helped by a midwife, and Mary births her first child (babies are born every day!). But the entire story is overshadowed by the miraculous with angels appearing to shepherds and announcing the birth of their Messiah.

Now, in today's scripture lesson, the same pattern occurs. The Hebrew religious system requires circumcision and naming of babies at the Temple, and the attending priests simply do their job, but God also touches the hearts of two highly respected Jewish leaders, Simeon and Anna the prophet. The common was that of circumcision, naming and presentation – a ritual that every male baby (cf. circumcision, naming and presentation) and female baby (cf. naming and presentation) went through, with the ritual happening to other babies every day of the year. The miraculous was the prophecies of both Simeon and Anna, which indicated that this was not just another birth ritual, but was the coming of “the Lord's Messiah” (2:26).

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple to be both named and circumcised, and for Mary to be purified from her childbirth. Coming to the Temple for this ceremony was required by Jewish Law (Lev. 12, Gen. 17:9-14), and Mary and Joseph are being faithful in keeping every measure of that Law. It is particularly intriguing that Luke reminds the reader that Mary and Joseph are only poor peasants; this we know because the price they pay for Mary's purification (“a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” vs. 24) is what Leviticus 12:8 stipulates is the “bargain” price that only demonstrably poor people are required to pay! The price for circumcision is a small gift of money, but that is not recorded in the text.

The naming of Jesus was significant, as was the naming of any Jew. A person's name symbolized either who he was or what he would contribute to life. Thus, “Moses” meant “the one drawn out”, and the baby Moses was drawn out of the Nile and later drew the people of Israel out of bondage to Pharaoh. The name “David” meant “beloved of God”, and David was “a man after God's own heart” (I Sam. 13:14). The Hebrew version of “John” (a Greek name) meant “God is gracious” – and God had indeed been gracious to the childless Anna and Zechariah, as he had been to Abraham and Sarah!

At his circumcision, Joseph and Mary named their baby “Jesus” (2:21), the very name the angel told them to give him when the child was conceived in Mary's womb (1:31). Thus, just as a baby is publicly named in a Christian baptism or dedication (the officiant asks, “What is the name of your child?”), so the Jews named their children at the Jewish ritual comparable to baptism – circumcision! It was an ordinary event. But it was no ordinary name, for the name “Jesus” meant “God saves” – and that, Luke wants the reader to understand, is what Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection was all about – bringing personal liberation and corporate transformation to both the Jewish and Gentile worlds!

So these were all ordinary events in Judaism – the naming of the child, his circumcision and the mother's purification. It happened many times each day to many Jewish families. It was a part of the daily ritual within the Temple. There was nothing to mark this performance of these rituals for this baby from any other performance of the identical rituals for other families. Or was it?

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (2:25-26)!

It is very intriguing that Luke makes a sharp divide between the circumcision of Jesus and the stories of Simeon and Anna. Jesus’ naming, circumcision and Mary’s purification were all done as ceremonial acts, the priests likely moving with alacrity through the rituals they had performed countless times over. There was, Luke wants us to understand, nothing extraordinary about those rituals done over Jesus, for it did not draw the attention of the attending priests. They simply did their expected job and received their expected payment. Nothing extraordinary happened because these “leaders of Israel” were looking for nothing extraordinary to happen!

The extraordinary began when Mary and Joseph collected their child, turned and walked away from the circumcision table. It was then that they met Simeon! And Simeon was expectant! Simeon was looking for “the consolation of Israel”⁷ (vs. 25). Simeon was looking for the coming of “the Lord’s Messiah” (vs. 26). And as soon as he saw the infant Jesus, he knew he had found him!

Simeon requests to hold the baby from a startled Mary who entrusts Jesus to this prophetic stranger. The scene is a tender one. “Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:28-32).

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word”. This prayer has come down into Christian liturgy as the *Nunc Dimittis*, so named because it “dismisses” God’s servant from worship. The *Nunc Dimittis* is the most beautiful of concluding prayers, used in the Daily Office of many traditions (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist and Lutheran churches). It is the last of the four magnificent songs in the preamble to the Gospel of Luke (the others being 1:47-55; 1:68-59 and 2:14), and it is both the most beautiful and the most poignant of those songs.

The opening sentence of the prayer is its most powerful. First, it addresses God as “Master.” The term, “master”, is a most unusual address for God, only used here and in Acts 4:24, and nowhere in the Old Testament. It is a word of total submission, for it is the title used by slaves and servants toward their overlord. Given the underlying themes of the three stories related thus far by Luke -- that each story describes the autocratic and God-ignoring political, economic and religious systems and yet have people in them sensitive to God’s action, the everyday and common actions of the peasants disconnected to the “Powers”, and the miraculous

⁷ The term, “consolation of Israel” was Luke’s shorthand way of referring to the Jewish tradition that God would personally intervene in world affairs to restore Israel to being the world’s archetypal “shalom community”, and that God would do this through “God’s Messiah”. Believing that this would most certainly happen “consoled” most Israelites.

work of God impacting both – Luke’s use of the unusual word “Master” to describe God and the entire thrust of the *Nunc Dimittis* is intriguing.

Could it be that what Luke is wishing to communicate to his readers is that it’s not about the systems, it’s not even about the peasants, but rather it’s all about God and God’s action in the world. As the saying goes, “Wake up and smell the coffee!” Wake up, Powers. Wake up, people. Wake up, Israel. Wake up, world. God is acting! God is on the move! God is on the move through this baby who has been brought to his predicted birth place by Powers oblivious to him, who has been so commonly born and so miraculously celebrated. And God will use this baby, once grown into an adult, to challenge the Powers, to transform the people and to bring God’s liberating salvation to the whole world. Thus, it is God who is in charge, who will bring to pass what God intends for humanity, that God will overcome the Power’s efforts to control or to dominate, that God’s purposes will be realized – and your appropriate response, whether you are reader, peasant or Power is to submit to those intentions and become servant to the God named “Master”.

Second, the opening sentence of this prayer begins (after recognizing God’s authority), “now”. It is a startling word, even in English. But in Greek, it is far more powerful. It has been placed in the emphatic position of the sentence (“**Now** you are dismissing your servant in peace”), and that emphasis stresses that an action has now just occurred that will keep on moving through the world like a wave moves toward the shore. God has acted to liberate and redeem humanity, and that action now continues unstopably into the future. With God’s act, salvation has already dawned on humanity for Jesus has come and nothing will ever be the same again – no matter what the Powers might do!

The third key word in the opening sentence is “dismiss” (it can also be translated “release”). “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace”. The word “dismiss” can be interpreted in two ways. First, it can be used as an euphemism for “to let die”. That is clearly one of Luke’s intentions in this passage because he has earlier told us that Simeon “would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (vs. 26). Well, now he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. So his death was imminent.

But the word also means “to discharge”. It is the word that a master uses to his servant, and it can also be intended as the same by Luke, given his heavy emphasis on master and servant previously in this sentence. Simeon can now be discharged by God from his weighty responsibility, which was to keep on proclaiming the coming of the Messiah for whom he was to wait (his very waiting implying that the Messiah would come during Simeon’s lifetime). Now Simeon can put down this heavy burden, for his wait is over, the Messiah has been born, and his work is now completed. Only death is now ahead of him.

The prayer itself actually consists of three couplets. All are intentionally rooted in Old Testament scripture, primarily Isaiah 40:5, 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; 52:1 and 60:1. And the three couplets tell us three things. First, God is now acting, and is doing so through the birth of God’s Messiah (vs. 29-30). Second, Simeon introduces the image of the Isaiac Servant of Yahweh as the primary metaphor for interpreting the work and mission that this baby will undertake as a man – a mission that will seek to restore God’s people to the Jubilee world that God intends (vs.

31). Third, this redemptive work of the man Jesus will not be for Israel alone but for the entire world, as his mission results in the transformation of the world's Powers, the world's people, and even of the miraculous and holy of life (vs. 32).

Thus, Simeon ends his psalm of praise. But he is not finished yet. He turns to Mary and speaks to her words that had to be extremely disconcerting. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (vss. 34-35). Evil, Simeon is saying, will not surrender quietly. In one sense, the battle is over because God is on the move and has acted through the birth of this baby. But in another sense, the battle has not yet begun. The lust for power, the seduction of wealth, the yearning for prestige, the need to thrust away all people not like yourself – whether incorporated in the way the Roman Empire or the Hebrew priesthood choose to rule their worlds, or in the lusts, meanness and greed of the people, or in the use of manipulation by those setting the world's values – will not accept this baby willingly. All that he stands for, and all that he seeks to do in ministry that will empower and liberate people will be opposed. He will be criticized, negated, betrayed, hunted down, even crucified. The world has only now begun a massive battle that will go on for thousands of years. And worst of all – "a sword will pierce your own soul too!"

There is nothing further told of Simeon; he simply disappears from the pages of scripture. But Luke then tells the story of Anna the prophet, who "never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day". She, too, sees the infant Jesus. And she adds her voice to Simeon's, praising God for bring about "the redemption of Jerusalem" through Jesus.

Luke's birth story then ends with the gentle words, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (vss. 39-40). This, of course, is meant as a transitional statement by Luke, in order to move the reader from the incidents surrounding the birth of Jesus to a story about Jesus as a youth. Luke will, in turn, end the story of the lad Jesus at the Jerusalem temple with the words, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (2:52) in order to transition the reader to an adult Jesus, ready to commence his ministry.

But the passage is more than solely transitional. It also tells us of Jesus' maturation, first from a baby and child into a youth (vs. 40) and then into an adult (vs. 52). It tells us that he physically "grew and became strong", that he was more than a typical Jewish student learning "Torah" but also one who was growing increasingly wise, reflective and deliberative. And finally, it tells us that "the favor of God was upon him" – that is, as he grew physically and intellectually, he was also growing spiritually, becoming increasingly in tune with God's call upon his life and eager to follow that call. Thus, Luke has now prepared us for the adult stories of Jesus, as we see him at work throughout Israel in order to bring to life once again the kingdom of God – God's "shalom community" of justice, equity and oneness with God and all humanity – a kingdom for which Jesus was going to have to die!

Galatians 4:4-7 is one of the finest theological statements written by Paul that states the particular importance of the birth of Jesus.

“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”.

Could Gentiles become Christians? There were those Jewish Christians who had come to the churches in Gentile Galatia, telling the early Christians there that they could not become Christians unless they became Jews first. And the only way that male Gentiles could become Jews was to submit to the rite of circumcision (both male and female Gentile Jews were expected to observe the Law of Moses, as well). It is Paul’s concern to correct this misinterpretation of God’s saving work among Gentiles that prompted his writing of his Letter to the Galatians. And it is that concern that dominates today’s Epistle Lesson.

Paul uses an intriguing argument, steeped in the culture of his day, to state his case that submission to the Law (including circumcision) was unnecessary for salvation. He does this by arguing the difference between being a slave and a child. In the ancient world, a male child went through a strategic ceremony at a given point in his life in which he moved from childhood into adulthood.

In the Jewish world, on the first Sunday after a boy had passed his twelfth birthday, his father would take him to the synagogue where the father would publicly pray to God a thanksgiving for having been given the privilege of raising the child and, in essence, turning him over to God. The boy then prayed a prayer in which he acknowledged “my passage from boyhood to manhood”, so that henceforth he would assume responsibility for himself to “keep the commandments and bear the responsibility of mine actions”. This was the boy’s *‘Bar Mitzvah’* (which means “Son of the Divine Law”)!

Likewise, in the Greek world, a boy at eighteen would participate in a festival called the *“Apatouria”* in which his head would be shaved and he would be declared an *ephebos* or member of one of the ten male “clans” of Greece. In Rome, a boy between the ages of fourteen and seventeen would participate in a public ceremony called the *Liberalia* where he would be stripped of his boyhood toga (the *toga praetexta*) and be clothed in an adult toga (the *virilis*), as he attained manhood.

The point of all these ceremonies was that, at a designated time, a boy became a man. Until then, he was a child with no capacity to participate in public life. Consequently, he had no more rights than a slave, even if he were the son of a king. But once he went through the appropriate public ceremony (whether he was Jewish, Greek or Roman), he became a man, had “put away childish things” (in fact, in the Roman world, he had to divest himself of all his toys), and now began to act as a man in his engagement in public life.

This is why, at the beginning of Galatians 4, Paul speaks of human salvation with the words, “heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property” (4:1). So it is that those of us who are Gentiles were, at one time, like children. We are children of God the Father – that is our inheritance. But we are “no better than slaves” because we have not participated in the act that turns us from boys to men, girls to women.

“But when the fullness of time had come”, Paul wrote, “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” (vss. 4-5). In other words, Paul is saying that our “Bar Mitzvah”, our “Apatouria”, our “Liberalia” was the birth of Jesus Christ which set us free from sin and death. Thus, Paul is arguing, it is irrelevant whether the ceremony that turns a boy into a man is the *bar mitzvah* of the Jews, the *apatouria* of the Greeks or the *liberalia* of the Romans, the fact is that the boy is turned into a man! So it is that Jesus’ saving birth, though he was “born of a woman, born under the Jewish Law” (that was his context), was a birth in which “God sent his Son” to provide salvation to all (that was the reality). That is a saving act for all people! For just as it is foolish to demand that a Roman who has undergone the *Liberalia* not be considered a man until he undergoes his *Bar Mitzvah*, so it is equally foolish to demand that a Gentile Christian undergo the Jewish ritual of circumcision (and obedience to the Law) in order to be authentically considered a Christian!

The sign that it was Jesus’ birth and death that saves us, and not our acts (even an act as radical as circumcision), is that we all, Gentile and Jewish Christian alike, call God “Abba (daddy), Father”! Thus, he who remains enslaved by fixation on the Law, remains a child for he is as enslaved by his commitment to the law as a child is enslaved to obedience of his parents. “But he who becomes a man has put away childish things” (I Cor. 13:12), and now embraces God as Father because he has trusted in that father as symbolized in his participation in the sacrament of baptism. “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (vs. 7).

The 2nd Sunday after Christmas

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; John 1:1-18; Ephesians 1:3-14

Jeremiah 31:7-14 is essentially a message of hope. It comes near the end of the book of Jeremiah, which has consisted primarily of dire predictions of the evil that would befall the nation of Judah because of their refusal to follow the Mosaic covenant. But then, in chapters 30 and 31, a ray of hope bursts forth – the promise that, although Judah will have to face exile and punishment for their refusal to build a nation of political, economic and spiritual shalom, once their punishment has brought about the desired humbling effect, they will once again be restored to their beloved Promised Land.

“For thus says the Lord: sing aloud with gladness for Jacob and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise and say, “Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel”. See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I

will lead them back. I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn” (vss. 7-9).

After the dark of the night, the day dawns! After the suffering and ignominy of exile and slavery, freedom and restoration comes! The nation of Judah will be freed and its political, economic and religious leaders will be released from captivity and returned to their liberated land. Israel’s former powerful and influential will return from exile, but also those who are the most vulnerable (the blind, the lame, the pregnant). The very fact that women will return pregnant from exile is an indication that the nation has a future and a hope. God will lead them back and will become a father to the people. That miraculous return will be witness to both Israel and to the world that God recognizes that they are family (although they were very much at one time prodigal children; cf. Luke 15:11-32)), and so will restore them because “this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found” (Lk. 15:24).

But the prophecy continues. “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock”. For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord” (vss. 10-14).

The focus now shifts from God’s communication to Israel to God’s communication with all the nations of the world. It is as if God is saying to the nations, “Look and see what it is like for a nation that makes Yahweh their God and who is willing to live in justice, equity and in relationship with him. Look and see how God loves his people and cares for them. For though they have been punished for their commitment to power, greed and domination (in imitation of the other nations of the world), once Israel has seen the error of their ways and has repented, then God will restore them to health and wholeness, abundance and wealth. They will prosper (an abundance of grain, wine, oil, livestock). They will live in joy and delight (the women dance, the young and old men both make merry). They will be comforted by God. And they – young and old, women and men, laity and clergy – they will all experience the love and generosity of God! That is the end of all those who truly receive God’s grace and live in obedience to God’s call.

Psalm 147:12-20 is a hymn of praise that follows on from Psalm 146. It praises God for his great love and power, exercised for humanity. I am struck once again, in verses 1-6, how the psalmist interposes the themes of the creative power of God and God’s commitment to the outcast and the powerless. It is intriguing that, invariably, these are the two primary characteristics of God lifted up by the psalmists. These are the two godly elements that cause us to perceive and worship God as God! Note the juxtapositions:

“The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. . . . The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground” (147:2-4, 6).

One of the most beautiful metaphors in the Psalm is the author’s use of a horse and a runner to describe those who compete well and are normally successful in life. The psalmist states that God does not take delight in the success of the most competitive (the “winners” or “haves” of society), but rather takes delight in those who “take pleasure” in God.

“His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of the runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (vss. 10-11).

The psalmist then ends this psalm with these words: “Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat. He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down hail like crumbs – who can stand before his cold? He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow. He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord” (vss. 12-20).

The psalmist completes this hymn of worship by using God’s creative work as the connecting tissue throughout the Psalm. In the early part of the psalm, he had linked God’s creative power and God’s commitment to the outcast and the powerless. Now, he links God’s creative power (“he gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes; he hurls down hail like crumbs; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow”) and God’s commitment to create a nation of shalom (“he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you; he grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat; he declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel”).

The psalmist describes that shalom community that God is building within Israel. God’s shalom people are a people with a strong defense against enemy attack (vs. 13a), a people whose children live in contentment and freedom (13b), a people who experience peace between each other (14a), who are economically prosperous (14b), and who are living in a right relationship with God (vs. 19). They are even a people who, living in shalom, experience oneness with creation subdued and quieted before them (vss. 15-18). In other words, the psalmist is describing Israel as a shalom community politically (vss. 13-14a), economically (14b) and religiously (vs. 19). Their systems, as well as they themselves as a people and as individuals, are “at-one” with God, each other and all creation. “(God) has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances” (vs. 20a). Therefore, how else can God’s people respond but with the cry, “Praise the Lord” (vs. 20b)!

John 1:1-18. (It is rare for the Lectionary to repeat the same passage of scripture in the same season. But that is the case in this season of Christmastide. John 1:1-18 appears both in the Christmas Day lectionary and on the Second Sunday of Christmastide. Therefore, simply refer to the Christmas Day lectionary for my exegesis and exposition of John 1:1-18).

Ephesians 1:3-14 is the Epistle lesson for the Second Sunday of Christmastide. In its Greek original, Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence! Consequently, it is a single thought meant to introduce this entire letter. In other words, Ephesians 1:3-14 is the “executive summary” of this essay, in which Paul tells us what it is he is going to tell us more thoroughly throughout this letter.

In this section, Paul reviews what it is that God has done for us. He does so in a most succinct manner (even though it is all one lengthy sentence). Further, he then states why it is that God has done what he has done for us. Let’s look at that list.

First, God “*blessed* us in Christ, with every spiritual blessing” (1:3).

Second, God “*chose* us before the foundation of the world” (1:4).

Third, God “*adopted* (us) as his children through Jesus Christ” (1:5).

Fourth, God “*redeemed*” and “*forgave*” us through Christ’s redemptive work (vss. 7-8).

Fifth, God has “*made know to us* the mystery of *his will*” (i.e., what we are called to do as God’s people) (1:9).

Sixth, God has “*marked (us) with* the seal of *his Holy Spirit*” (1:13).

Thus, Paul is telling us that everyone of us as Christians and all of us as the Body of Christ have been blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, have come to know God’s will and are marked with the Holy Spirit! God has given all of this to us through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But why has God blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, called, baptized us and filled us with God’s Spirit? This introduction to the book of Ephesians now reaches its apex of intention. God has done this great work within each of us and all of us, Paul writes, so that we, as God’s adopted family, might participate in God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10), so that we “might live for the praise of his glory” (1:12).

God has worked in us as individuals and as a community of faith in the ways Paul describes in this passage in order that we might live out in the world the work that Jesus intends to do through God (“things in heaven”) and through us (“things on earth”). But what does Paul mean by “things in heaven and things on earth?”

Because this passage is the “executive summary” of the entire book of Ephesians, Paul will spend much of the remainder of that book in defining “things in heaven and things on earth” and our obligations towards them. Paul, as a first century person, believed that the spirit world (“things in heaven”) and the physical world (“things in earth”) were closely link. To Paul, what happens in the spirit world has its counterpart on earth, and what happens on earth impacts heaven. Therefore, the principalities and powers are, at one and the same time, both spiritual and earthly, with the spiritual dimension of that power providing the spiritual dimension and unique

power of any earthly system! Thus, *every* reference in Ephesians and Colossians to “principalities and powers” or “heaven and earth” is a reference both to the Roman Empire and to the dark spiritual forces controlling and shaping and driving the Roman Empire!

Thus, in Ephesians 1:10, Paul’s reference to “(God’s) plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” is not rhetoric to Paul. It is his code for the political, economic and religious institutions of earth – and especially of Rome – and their matching “principalities and powers” in the heavens (cf. Col. 1:15-16).

Since Paul means here the systems of the government, of the marketplace and of religion, what is he saying that the church is called to do? What he is stating is that the church is to be active in participating on the side of God in challenging the systems here on earth, even as the angels wage comparable war in the heavens. What Paul is declaring is that ***the church is to be involved in public life as its essential mission!*** And that is why God has “blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, made known his will, and given us the Holy Spirit” – so that we could be God’s agents in the world, working through the politics, economics and social systems of that society to transform it into the kingdom of God!