

December 30, 2007
Sermon by Jan Hanson

In the name of Christ who calls us...

Merry Christmas! One of the wonderful things about our particular tradition is celebrating the Christmas **season**. We have 12 whole days to rejoice in the mystery of Emmanuel, "God with us". Another name for Christmas is the Feast of the Incarnation, and you may have heard Anglicans described as "Christmas People" because of that emphasis in our theology.

What does that mean?

What does John mean when he says, "the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"?

The Gospel of John is so different from the other gospels; why is this story of the incarnation so unlike any other gospel's telling of the baby Jesus? For that matter, why is this story different from the Creation stories in Genesis? "In the beginning was the Word." Surely this reading is a librarian preacher's dream!

An ancient Hebrew prayer says "In the beginning was the Torah." "*Torah*" is usually translated as "law" and today's gospel may be pointing to the word "logos" or "word" as an idea equally foundational to the Ground of our Being. The ancient Greek Stoics spoke of a universal order of reality as "logos" and John is a gospel that bridges the Greek and Hebrew worldviews. Where the other gospels speak of "the kingdom" John speaks of Logos, or the "word", Phos or "light", and Sophia, or Wisdom. But, what is that Word?

In reading the Gospel of John, I sometimes feel I'm stuck in a quagmire of not-knowing, as opposed to centered within a cloud of unknowing. I have always loved the poetry of his words, but have been less sure about exactly what he was trying to say. The odd thing is, that this time, the message might be simply what it says; in the beginning was the Word. The Ancient of Days is the Baby Jesus; the nature of God is both timeless and historical, in the beginning and in the now. An early church father, Irenaeus, said it this way, "The Word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for mankind, became what we are in order to make us what He is Himself." We are to become fully human as Jesus was fully human.

Today we might say that *logos* is the Operating System, the assembly language, the logical code in which creation is written. It is a code as mysterious to us as the secrets of DNA were to Gregor Mendel.

In the world of letters and literature, perhaps our greatest loss in 2007 was the passing of Madeleine L'Engle, the author Mother Kathleen quoted last week from "The Irrational Season". She has a marvelous explanation of the connection

between Word and God in "*A Wind in a Door*," one of the books of her *Wrinkle in Time* quartet. Meg learns that the forces of darkness are destroying her brother, the stars, cellular mitochondria and the fabric of the universe by "un-naming" -- dissolving their very identity, a kind of cosmic Alzheimer's. This evil darkness is combated by Naming.

As we heard in today's psalter:

"and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give."

Naming, like Adam seeing each animal for the first time, is the word spoken when the Beloved is regarded with unconditional love. Words shape our thoughts, our understanding, they are the creative force that build libraries, civilizations, and enlighten us. We use words to shape our prayers until we find the prayers that need no words, but are simply Word, "Logos".

Today's Old Testament lesson is a prayer shaped by incarnational thinking:

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. ...
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Isaiah uses this language, not to say that the hand of God uses opposable thumbs to sow righteousness in the soil, but to use the language of earth and garden and bodily adornment to bring God's grace and glory alive in our imaginations.

Incarnational thinking was very familiar to the early Celtic Church.

How does Columba address the deity?

My dearest Lord,
Be thou a bright flame before me,
Be thou a guiding star above me,
Be thou a smooth path beneath me,
Be thou a kindly shepherd behind me,
Today and for ever more.
... words we can see and touch and hear.

And Aidan of Lindisfarne?

Blessed be the Creator of the earth;
Blessed be the Lord of the Harvest;
Blessed be Christ, who descended;
Blessed be the Word made flesh.
Blessed to us the land that it may be fruitful;
Blessed to us the ground,
that it may yield a harvest;
Blessed to us the earth,
that it may be the place of our resurrection.
... words we can see and touch and hear.

Brigit, the Bishop of Kildare also has a generous and earthy prayer;

I'd like to give a lake of beer to God.
I'd love the Heavenly Host to be tipping there for all eternity.
I'd love the Host of Heaven to live with me, to dance and sing.
... these are words we can taste and dance with.

The Celt's prayers acknowledged the presence of the Divine in earthly form, recognizing the goodness in God's creation. These are Christmas People.

My daughter JanE has always loved Christmas. What child doesn't? Her sister's first Christmas wish, when she was old enough to talk, was a Santa outfit, and we complied with a red footed sleeper, black rubber boots, white gloves and a Santa hat and beard. But with JanE it was different; even as a young child, she was not interested in the commercial trappings, but in the secret kindnesses she could do to others, (the piece of straw left in the manger) the delight of creatively expressing her love for us and the special beauty of the church adorned with evergreens and candlelight. Her Christmas in Germany was especially lovely, as only *WienNachten* can be. But the Christmas season doesn't always follow a Hallmark script. Last year her beloved kitty was dying. Shadow, who JanE always said "smelled like Christmas", is no longer with us. Change is hard. On the way home from visiting family near Seattle last week, JanE cried and cried and said "Christmas is cursed; last year Shadow died, this year we're selling our house, and next year it may be worse!"

I know this happened because her sister told me. Julian also said, "Mom, you KNOW how important Christmas is to JanE, I'm really worried about her!" And in that compassionate moment, the former toddler who wanted to be Santa was the incarnate spirit of Christmas. In the midst of all of our change and turmoil, our family has had our best Christmas ever. Somehow, in the hubbub of bringing Grandma into our home, with no time for our usual traditions, we have had more time with each other. I did my Christmas shopping at 10 o'clock on Christmas Eve, when I bought a malaria net card for everyone in my extended family. I don't think they ever were as touched by anything I'd given them before. JanE found her spirit of Christmas sometime during the Christmas Eve service and played Santa, filling our stockings, once again surprising us with her thoughtfulness and microscopic handwritten notes. We are not moving away, we are moving into the wonderful home of Dick & Lynn Benson!

[The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.](#)

We are a Christmas People, and that means that in the midst of the darkest days we look for the light that leads us to the Christchild.

Merry Christmas!