

Faith Mennonite Church
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Joetta Schlabach

A Cosmic Birth *John 1:1-18*

In the beginning was the Word. Last Sunday evening, the children and youth dramatized the story of Jesus' birth as depicted in the Gospel of Luke. Both Luke and Matthew's gospels begin with a genealogy of Jesus (each with a slightly different purpose) and then follow with a narrative set in first century Palestine, with references to the social and political reality of that time. We have clear images from those stories: angel visitations, dreams, babies leaping in wombs, women singing, shepherds, stars, magi, a pregnant woman traveling on a donkey and then giving birth among animals, a baby in a manger, a hurried escape to Egypt.

Mark's gospel doesn't include a birth narrative. For him, the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" begins with the adult John the Baptist calling people to repentance and preparing the way for the adult Jesus who would follow and supersede him.

Like Mark, John's gospel omits any reference to Jesus' birth or childhood, but John's beginning takes us back to *the* beginning—to the very first birth story, the story of creation, the birth of the cosmos. The opening verses of John's poetic prologue to his gospel mirror the opening verses of the poetic first chapter of Genesis. Jesus's life does not begin in a manger; he was present at creation. And not just present, but a participant: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (v. 3). The very first act of creation in Genesis 1, is the Word calling forth light: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness." (vv. 3-4).

In John's gospel, John the Baptist does not quote Isaiah or speak of repentance; rather he witnesses to Jesus' connection to creation as one who not only brings light, but *is* the light. What does light do? Light reveals; light allows us to see what is. God had been revealing Godself to humanity since the beginning – through the natural order of creation and through God's relationship with a people that involved covenant and law and prophets. Yet humanity, even God's chosen people, did not always see clearly. They turned away, time and again.

In order to fully reveal Godself, God sends the Word—the Word that was present with God at creation, close to God's heart in intimate relationship. That Word becomes flesh—*sarx* in Greek, which denotes earthiness. This isn't simply a generic human, but a person, in the flesh, who's willing to get dirty, to enter the mud and mess of life. This Word, this flesh, "pitches a tent," in the Greek, to camp out with us. And, John writes, "we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Glory? In the mud? In the mess? Camping out?

Yes, glory. And not just a hint of grace, but "grace upon grace." John is forecasting, in this prologue, what is about to unfold in his gospel. Jesus is the light that will help people see God: as he changes water into wine, as he heals those who have been long crippled and blind, as he multiplies bread to feed a multitude, as he allows a woman to wash his feet and then kneels to wash his disciples' feet, and, yes, as he faces those who oppose him, even to death. For John, this death is not merely a step on the way to glory, to resurrection. Rather, the very act of dying displays Jesus' glory, just like the self-giving act of taking on flesh, just like the beginning of creation.

Two millennia have passed since Jesus lived and died. The lack of knowing and recognition that John the Baptist spoke of sounds very contemporary. Some days we feel entirely enveloped in darkness—not just because the diminished light in the northern hemisphere at this time of year—but because so many people continue to suffer in horrific ways from war and famine and poverty...and because signs are becoming alarming of how quickly the climate is changing and bringing its threatening affects...and because fear of the other—other races, other religions, other cultures, other opinions only seems to deepen...and because illnesses, like cancer, continue to visit and claim those we love much sooner than we would wish.

We long for light, for grace and truth in the same way that our ancestors did. Our celebration of Christmas is an affirmation that the light has come and continues to be Emmanuel, God with us. This light “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” If any of you have visited a cavern, you may remember the part of the tour, when you arrive at the deepest section, and the tour guide turns off the lights so you can experience total, pitch darkness. The story is told of one such time when the lights went out and a small child began to cry. His sister quickly consoled him saying, “Don’t worry, there’s someone who knows how to turn on the light.”

Even in our greatest darkness, we trust there is someone who knows how to turn on the light. Not the flashy lights of Broadway, not the fleeting light of Fourth of July fireworks, not the blinding flashlight of a trooper who has pulled someone over in the dark of night. The one who became flesh and camped with us shines a light of presence, a light of solidarity with our suffering, with all who suffer. My husband Gerald learned on Friday that a friend and former colleague had to write a eulogy for his brother this past week. Honestly struggling to balance the deep grief of an untimely death of someone so full so life, with the season’s expectation of celebration and joy, he wrote: “the heart of Christmas is the joy of realizing that God comes to be with us in our human frailty, to absorb suffering and give us hope. God’s self-giving makes possible our self-giving to each other, our taking on each other’s burdens and suffering. That’s what separates joy from mere pleasure. The basic Christian conviction is that we are created by a God who is love, that the most essential thing about the universe is love.”

Love was born in the first light of creation. Love compelled Word to become flesh and dwell with us. Love surrounds us with grace and truth. May love be the light of Christ that shines in and through us this Christmas.