

Dec 29, 2024 – “Logos. Become Flesh. Dwells Among Us” – Mike Eggleston sermon at St Benedict’s

God played a little trick on me last week. Or maybe I played the trick on myself. Rev Linzi had a part in it too. The trick confounded me for moment, but soon made me laugh and be glad. What happened is, well, I knew two months ago I’d be preaching here on December 29. So having lots of time I looked up the Revised Common Lectionary for that day. It featured two sweet stories featuring children speaking in the temple. So I researched what’s said about children in ancient Jewish writings and what some say about how children learn today. By late last Monday night I wrote most of a sweet little sermon on children who ask questions. It was a light sermon, with two funny stories about people getting lost and found in crowds. And then the joke was on me. Rev Linzi last Tuesday emailed me the right scriptures for this Sunday. They were not the ones about the boys Samuel and Jesus in the temples. No, nor even children praising God with all creation in psalm 148. No. The right scripture today was the deepest and adultest theological passage in the Bible, John 1.1-18. Oh my. About face. Toss overboard that little sermon, reverse course 180 degrees and set full sail ahead not into Legoland but into Logos Land. Still, I wondered how I’d gotten wrong what I thought were the scriptures. When I mentioned that to gracious Linzi after Christmas Day worship she wondered if she’d gotten it wrong and emailed the wrong scriptures. Nope. I laugh, it turns out we both got it right. In the Revised Common Lectionary for today, used by Methodists and Presbyterians and Catholics and usually Episcopalians, the boys Samuel and Jesus in the temples are the scriptures. But it turns out for the two Sundays after Christmas, you Episcopalians, and I love it have altered course from the common lectionary and sailed into John chapter one, And also Isaiah 61 and Psalm 147, but I’ve got my hands way too full just making the weeest survey of John 1.1-18.

The Bible holds many awesome and world-shaping theological scriptures. Romans takes us into deep theological waters about righteousness and faith and how humans are saved by grace. The first chapter of Genesis gives us foundational teachings about God and the cosmos and life. But the author of John 1 says to Genesis, I’ll see your theology and cosmology and biology and raise you two. Here also is Christology, the nature of Christ, and soteriology, the work of salvation, and let’s for good measure throw in superb poetry and music as well. Way back when, for several years I was on the much-feared Methodist Board of Ordained Ministry who questioned and judged the readiness of all our candidates for the ministry. I was on the theology section. I remember one candidate of whom we decided, not quite ready yet. In the better luck next time exit interview we asked her to consider how John 1.1-18 might inform her in writing her theology papers for next year. She may have answered, “Um, I think the prologue to John is a bit above my paygrade. More likely it was all we board members who said its above our paygrades too. But the thing is, you can’t hardly do theology without dancing with John chapter one. I think she came back the next year and passed. Though I dropped from the board before that. got tired of judging people. But here we are again today, beyond our pay grades, making a little survey of John1. 1-18.

St Ben’s choir sang the opening notes of this two or three years ago, an awesome anthem. “In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. Repeat several times. OK. Diving in, you probably know that the word translated here into English as word is in Biblical Greek Logos. In English logos gives itself into English as logic, and so many of our sciences include it as a suffix. Biology, ecology, geology, musicology,

physiology, psychology, anthropology through zoology, and everything in between. Logos as a suffix means the science of, the nature of. Our Bibles translate logos as word, which is a good part of what it means. Logos certainly means communicating, expressing a message. But logos also means the underlying order, the reality of what is communicating. At the time the New Testament was being written, its authors like John borrowed logos from the best Greek philosophies of the time. For the stoics who were the most influential thinkers of the time in the Roman world, logos meant mind or intellect, especially it meant the mind and reason which underlies all things. I have to take a tangent into my little visit with Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in recent months. Six weeks back, reeling with the outcome of our election, I thought, I need to get well spiritually grounded, I need to do some praying and fasting and meditating and reading to get my act together before whatever is coming to America now breaks upon us. So I got to pray and worship at the Monastery of the Risen Christ for several days and I read many wise things. What has stayed especially from that is not something I expected. My not very philosophical sister left me a copy of Marcus Aurelio's Meditations to read, and it fit. It fit both today's scripture on Logos and also how perhaps to live ahead in the Trump years.

Marcus Aurelius was adopted into the role of Roman emperor. He didn't seek it. And Marcus though he is the most read stoic author still today did not see himself as a stoic philosopher. It was his cultural heritage. Most of us have inherited an English-speaking American-flavored Judeo-Christian rooted culture. As a Roman nobleman, Marcus inherited and deeply tried to live out his Roman stoic culture. He believed as did educated stoics of his time that the universe is one living organism, all interconnected and needing all its various parts to work together. Marcus as a stoic believed that the world and all its parts held a governing mind offering a reasonable way to live. That was the logos: the mind and the reason underlying all life. If you looked at the world as Marcus did, logos made sense. After all, the stars and planets all rightly followed their established paths, the logos for them. The seasons, the plants and the animals, all followed the logos, the established path for them. Water in its cycles, fire in its ways, wind, soil, sky, all followed their paths allotted by logos. So did farmers, craftsmen, children and parents, especially members of the military, they followed the rules and the guidance of their part of the logos. Emperors being at the top of the pyramid had the most freedom and therefore also the most responsibility to uphold the logos. A part the logos was within every creature. But humans, especially parents and teachers and rulers had added responsibility to uphold and honor logos, the logic and reason of all life.

What that translated to for Marcus in his journals was act with integrity and justice for the common good at all times and ways; that's what logos does. And yes, there would be mistakes, we all make them. There would be rogues and rebels and ignorant people and evildoers, and of course death and suffering, those are all part of existence. But evildoers really only hurt themselves. Quoting Marcus Aurelius now, "Someone despises me? That's their problem. Mine not to do or say anything despicable. Someone hates me? Their problem. Mine to be cheerful and patient with everyone, including them." "It can ruin your life only if it ruins your character. Otherwise it cannot harm you - inside or out." "Hour by hour, practice patience, honesty, humility." "Join yourself not just to the air surrounding us, but to the reason that embraces all things. Reason (logos) is just as omnipresent, just as widely diffused to those who accept it is as air is to those who breathe."

So when John 1.1-18 speaks of the logos, it's speaking of a power and a love that is spread throughout the universe and holds all things together In the beginning and eternally, logos.

Then John as you know takes a step further that Marcus Aurelius and most stoics and many people do not take. John tells us that the logos, the mind and the self-expression of God, became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. After a few verses about bearing witness to that, John gives us the powerful name of God's word become flesh, Jesus Christ.

There's a story about the word become flesh that you've probably heard before. Paul Harvey used to tell it once every year about this time, and he thought it was a religion editor for UPI, Lewis Cassels, who first told this story in answer to the question, "Why did God become incarnate in Jesus" This is called the Parable of the Birds. One night somewhere in rural America there was a man, a kind, decent, mostly good man upright in his dealings with others, who just didn't believe in all the incarnation stuff which the churches go on about at Christmas, and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. So he told his wife that he didn't want to distress her but would just stay home and miss Christmas Eve midnight service. It was a real cold night. He'd keep the fires going at home.

So, shortly after the family drove away, snowfall began. He went to the windows to watch the flurries quickly getting heavier and heavier, till he went back to his fireside chair and heard a thudding sound outside, More thuds in rapid succession. Maybe someone throwing snowballs against the window at 11 PM? Odd. But when opened the front door to investigate he found not kids but a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and had desperately tried to fly through his thick landscape window. Well, he couldn't just let the poor creatures lie there and freeze on Christmas Eve, so he remembered the barn where kids stabled the ponies. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could get the birds into it. Quickly he put on his coat, galoshes, scarf, tramped through the deepening now to the barn and opened the doors wide and lit a light. But the birds wouldn't come to it. And if he came close to them they summoned another strength to fly or skitter away from him. OK. Lure them in with food. He hurried back to the house, scattered a trail of breadcrumbs through the door of the barn. Nope. Birds weren't falling for that. In the deepening snow, he tried to catch any of them. Nope, they fluttered away from him. He tried herding birds, shouting waving his arms. Nope, they scattered every way, except toward his barn. He realized they were afraid of him. To them, he was a large, terrifying creature. If only he could find some way to let them know they could trust him, that he was trying to help. He tried whistling, chirping, No go.

"If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself. I could mingle with them and speak their language, and tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the warm safe barn. But I would have to be one of them, so they could see, hear, and understand." And at that moment, as Paul Harvey told it, the church bells began to ring. The sound reached our man's ears through the storm. And he stood listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christ's birth. Then he sank to his knees in the snow, and spoke to God. "Now I understand," he whispered. "Now I see why you had to do it."

Paul Havey left it there, and didn't tell the rest of the story. So we don't know whether any or all of the birds ever made it into the warm shelter. That's a story still to be told. But there is a rest of the story still be told for us humans, a part three hinted in John 1.1-18.

Part one is the logos, the mind and the word of God, with God in the beginning through whom all things are created. Part two is the logos, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and the name of the logos become flesh is Jesus Christ, who makes God known. Part three of the prologue to John is Christ in now abides in us. John doesn't quite say that precisely. Colossians 1.18 says it as clearly as I can find it in scripture. "The glory of the mystery, Christ in you, the hope of glory." Jesus says it pretty clearly though symbolically in John 15.4-5, "Abide in me, and I in you. I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me, and I in them, bears much fruit." In John 1 here today the words which come closest to saying that Christ now incarnates in us are verses 12 and 13, "To all who received him, he gave power to become the children of God, who are not born of blood nor of the will of flesh nor the will of men but of the will of God." And it seems to me that on Christmas Eve when Christians light candles from the Christ candle and hold them in the darkness, the message we are communicating then is that now Christ lives in us, To me also, whenever Christians consecrate the eucharist and receive the elements and take them into our bodies, we are remembering and recognizing that he now lives in us. Not only in the child of Bethlehem but through him to all who receive him and believe as says John 1.12, he gave power to become children of God. The logos of God is made flesh in us now too.

Rev Linzi on our Christmas Day service here also read for the gospel John 1.1-17. And she preached on it wisely. She said well, I not going to say a homily I've written today, I'm going to read instead from one of the churches' greatest theologians, St Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in the third century. Basil lived 150 years after Marcus Aurelius, but he would have understood the meaning of the word logos in much the same way as Marcus did but even more so. Marcus knew the logos as a thought, a whole constellation of thought and ideas, within his mind and heart. Basil saw those ideas and raised them one. He knew the logos as the living presence of Jesus Christ within him and among us. So I'll draw near to closing by re quoting something Linzi quoted from Basil the Great "Whatever place you can conceive of, wherever you can go in your spirit, you will find it filled with God." And "do not look outside yourself, but enter into the hidden recesses of your own soul," said Basil. "There once you have identified at the God who you have learned was at the beginning. Who proceeded as Word, who is with God, once you have worshipped you own Master who dwells in you through this teaching, realize that this one was in the beginning, that he is, he is always with God his Father."

It might have been delightful to have preached about the two little boys in their temple. It can be even better to realize and witness that Christ lives now in the temples of our hearts and in the hearts of his church. Thank you Lord, Amen.