

Sermon – Christmas 1 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

John 1: 1-18

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable to you O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Ps 19:14

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” It is fitting I feel that these words from the prologue of John’s gospel account have been set as our gospel reading for today. Today marks the beginning of our relationship and our journey together for as many years as God has planned out. Today also marks the last Sunday of the calendar year, a time when we often reflect on the year past and set new goals for the year ahead.

It is for me a truly wonderful blessing to have been asked by Bishop Larry to be your priest here at the church that you love and I love, a place where you confirmed my call to ministry and shepherded me from humble seminarian to an ordained priest in the church of God.

I do recognize two things as I come to serve you. Firstly, you as children of God have had a rough year I understand, maybe an *annus horribilis* as Queen Elizabeth said of her year in 1992. I recognize that the difficulties that the parish has faced have been made known to me only through our Bishop, his staff, and a few of you that I saw at Convention. I have much to understand and I want to make a commitment to you to listen to your experience, possibly your anger and frustration and also to your vision for the future of the parish of St Luke and St Matthew.

Secondly, I want to recognize that we stand together at the crossroad, that intersection of life where disparate paths converge. It is a place of extreme potency and the place where we confront the necessity of choice and the immensity of fate. When we stand at a crossroad in life we face a matrix that consists of union, but also separation and farewell. A crossroad represents the possibility of many ways but also a commitment to a singular path.

We cannot change history. We can only change the path forward as we walk toward a vision for this parish, a Christian community centered on Jesus Christ, a visible fellowship of Christian people. We can though mourn history and historic events and at times we are called to both honor our mourning and focus forward to a new day. It is in the comfort of the Holy Spirit in mourning and the power of hope found in Jesus Christ that allows us to cross the threshold from mourning, grief and anger to new life of reconciliation, healing and hope.

Life is full of threshold moments. The eve of a new calendar year is but one. Our modern culture steers us to review the past, both national and personal times, and to set new resolutions for the future. Resolutions are a way for us to acknowledge that something in our past has not been all that great and that we hope to change in the year ahead.

A lot of resolutions are trivial – cut down on alcohol, eat better and lose weight, stop smoking, include more exercise in a daily schedule, be more focused on the family and so on. According to Business Insider 80% of new year resolutions fail by February. Worse, Forbes magazine says that

only 8% of people achieve their new year resolutions. You would think that with those failure rates we would give up on making resolutions. Hope for change though is powerful.

There are many other threshold moments in our lives, especially in our lives of faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism is a powerful threshold moment as we become initiated into the body of Christ, the church and are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We may also experience epiphanies or awakenings as threshold moments. These are the times that God speaks to us, breaking through to touch our hearts and to awaken us to a change that God has in store for us.

Other thresholds moments are those where we make conscious decisions to seek healing and reconciliation with those that we feel have wronged us or have wronged others. These are powerful moments of decision and require courage and faith and prayer to decide to cross that threshold and to make amends with someone.

The regenerative nature of creation brings forth threshold moments like these. God makes us aware of them if our hearts are open to hear and feel the presence of God working in our lives. When we embark on these paths we are allowing God to create a better world for all because God acts through God's people.

The gospel passage set for today is a powerful reminder of God acting in creation through people. First and foremost God brought God's self forward into the world in the form of Jesus the Christ, God in human flesh who was to be the light that would shine in the darkness, a light so strong that darkness could never over come it.

Second, God sent forth a herald before Jesus in the man John, known to us as John the Baptist. John came as a witness to testify to the light that as Jesus. Many people poured out of Jerusalem and the surrounding towns and villages to see John, and to be baptized by him with the baptism of repentance. Many of those that went out to meet John were hoping for a messiah, but it was not John.

The messiah was God in Jesus but they did not recognize him. They were closed off and their hearts were cold and skeptical. The world was trapped in darkness like at the beginning of time. Many people rejected Jesus and did not accept him. Rejection of another of course is such a cold, dark and divisive action.

John the evangelist tells us that some did in fact accept Jesus and received him and believed in his name. By receiving Jesus they accepted his teaching and his revelation that he was from God. By believing in him he gave them the right to become "children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." There can be no greater threshold moment in life than to be born of God.

Jesus came into the world to live amongst us. The Greek word used here means "to pitch a tent" or to be "tabernacled." This image harks back to the time when God was tabernacled in the camp of the fleeing Israelites. All this means that God's presence was localized, and in this time God was localized in the person Jesus.

Since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus we have become the body of Christ, the holy tabernacle of God's presence in the world. God's outpouring in the world is through us, localized in our communities and families. We have been given an immense responsibility to nurture the flame of Christ's light in the darkness. For me, and hopefully for you too, this is a very intimate responsibility.

God's glory in his son was full of grace and truth, it was a reliable promise for the world. We are also filled with God's grace and truth, love and faithfulness as we too become a reliable witness to Jesus Christ in our part of the world.

As we now stand together at the crossroad, remembering the past and looking to the future, we have to commit to a singular path. That path my friends is only found in Jesus Christ, in his grace and truth, reconciliation, love and faithfulness. We are entrusted to be reliable witnesses to Jesus' love for the world and so the threshold that we need to cross is one that asks of us – are we a reliable witness to Jesus Christ, both in this community of faith, and the in community in which we live.

We need each other to come together as a rope of God's strength that can withstand evil and the darkness of division. As individual threads we are vulnerable and weak and can easily be broken. As a rope of many threads we become God's strength because we are mutually bound together. When we become discouraged we need our Christian sisters and brothers to speak grace and truth to us, to love us and to encourage us. We need to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through our community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that the goal of a Christian community is to "meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation."¹ God brings us together and permits us to meet and worship together. We are justified through grace alone, "this alone is the basis of the longing of Christians for one another."² He also says that "Christian brother and sisterhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."³

We have much work to do together in the coming year. Acknowledging and then healing from a difficult year, and also putting on the spiritual mantle Jesus calls us to claim, is first and foremost. A new leadership team has to be assembled and commissioned, our finances have to be stabilized, the physical renovation of the building's façade has to be commenced and plans for internal renovations have to be advanced.

Just as the façade of the buildings need our attention, so does the spiritual and worship life of each of us, and those that have left. We need to be built up again through God's grace. I pray and hope that you will join me in crossing this threshold, and together continue the journey toward affirming this place again as a beacon of God's love, justice and faithfulness in the world.

Amen

¹ Bonhoeffer D *Life Together* Harper and Row, New York 1954, p23

² ibid

³ ibid p30