

Text: John 1: 10-18
Title: I have a relationship with Jesus....
Date: 01.03.10
Roger Allen Nelson

Christmas is too short.

I don't mean the giant run up that starts in mid-November when malls and marketers begin priming our seasonal buying pumps. I don't mean that there is not enough time for gifts and music and fruit cake and eggnog and parties and programs. Christmas is too short because the core meaning ~ the essential mystery ~ is so profoundly unwieldy and unyieldingly ludicrous that we need more than a day or two to let it percolate.

We get four weeks of Advent to voice our longing and waiting on God.

We get forty days of Lent to examine our frailty and our failings

We get six weeks after Easter to bask in resurrection glow

We get twenty-some weeks after Pentecost to live into the fullness of God's poured out Spirit.

But, Christmas is just twelve short days ~ the same 12 short days when we are swamped with relatives, take vacations, navigate the mall to return gifts, and squeeze in New Year's shenanigans. Christmas is too short.

Oh! And, despite popular opinion the 12 days of Christmas do not precede Christmas; they follow Christmas. We are in Christmastide this morning. This is the ninth day? Bring on the dancing ladies...

Maybe the real battle for Christmas isn't whether or not there is a crèche in the school yard or the clerk at the Gap says "happy holidays," but it is that Christmas has been relegated to a quaint song with maids a milking, geese a laying, and lords a leaping ~ rather than 12 days of wonder and astonishment and 12 sleepless nights being stumped, stupefied, and staggered by the essential mystery of Christmas.

And, what is the essential mystery of Christmas?

How is it that God came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth?

What does it mean that God became one of us?

How is Jesus, Immanuel ~ God with us?

Or maybe more pointedly: Did God come in Jesus?

Did God come in Jesus in a way that is singular, unique, unparalleled and unrepeatable?

What if we come at it this way?

John opens his gospel not with story, genealogy, or geography. He doesn't begin with a colorful cast of characters set against the backdrop of night skies and Palestinian hills.

John opens his gospel with the poetry of the cosmos.

There is no bigger stage.

There is no farther grasp.

There is no broader sweep.

From beginning to eternity, from nothing to everything, from Word to world, from darkness to light....

Until from the very fullness of creation it narrows to one person, to one heart, to one body, to one flesh. After all that poetry it comes down to one person ~ not Moses, not John, not Garth or Gabriel or Gilda, but Jesus. In John's words:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Frederick Buechner writes that there are two voices in our text. There is the poet's voice. It is a voice sung, not said, a hymn not a homily. And, then there is the second voice, "insistent, over-earnest, a little nasal." It is the voice that keeps interrupting with the confusion about John, and difference of John, and the role of John. There are two voices. As Buechner puts it:

It is good to have both the voices. The sound the second voice makes is the very human sound, and you need a very human sound to get your bearings in the midst of the first voice's unearthly music. It is also good to have the interruptions. There should be interruptions in sermons too: the sound of a baby crying, a toilet being flushed ~ something to remind us of just what this flesh is that the Word became, the Word that was with God, that was God. What it smells and sounds and tastes like, this flesh the Word buckled on like battle dress. When the host is raised before the altar to the tinkling of the bells, it is very meet and right if not his bounden duty for the sexton to walk through with a vacuum cleaner.

And that is precisely the problem. How does God become man ~ particularly and peculiarly in Jesus? How is it that God is embodied in the same skin as Ruth Pelaski ~ tissue paper thin, bruised, wrinkled, translucent, with tiny vulnerable visible veins, frail and fully human at 96 and half years? The mystery is: How does the fullness of God find full expression in the same skin as plump little babies and muscled athletes, as those pimped and those palsied, as porn stars and presidents? How is God dressed in the same flesh as me and you?

Other monotheistic faiths accept that God communicates with humanity.

God speaks through prophets, scripture, and Spirit. God speaks to Abraham in a burning bush, give Moses stone tablets, and whispers to Jeremiah. God whisked Muhammad up to heaven for a vision and dictated commandments to Joseph Smith. Other religions revel in the notion of revelation. God speaks through messengers and missives.

But, the central claim of Christianity is not a message but a person. God is embodied. God is one of us. God on earth. God incarnate. To quote Neil Plantinga:

God with a thumbprint and, for all we know, seasonal hay fever. Trying to describe the novelty of the incarnation, the New Testament writers borrowed from every source they could think of. They borrowed from wisdom literature and prophecy; they borrowed from history, poetry, and apocalypse. They strained to describe one who was simultaneously the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being and was also a

particular Jew, the son of Mary, a man who had not especially impressed the people he grew up with.

There is a fantasy or fairytale quality to that ~ and if you don't get that you've probably been in the church too long or too much. The planet has been visited by God, and it is not just a matter of the suspension of natural rules for the sake of a miracle. It is not simply parting a sea or turning a stick into a snake. It is a logical impossibility. The fullness of God ~ by definition all powerful, all knowing, etc.... in or as the fullness of humanity ~ by definition limited in power, knowledge, etc... And, the credal formulas don't solve the mystery; they simply state it with more poetry or precision. The Nicene Creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.

Now, I don't often repeat myself in sermons. I may repeat themes from sermon to sermon, but in most sermons I don't repeat the same thing over and over again ~ finding new words to mask the repetition. One of the gifts or curses of writing sermon manuscripts is a certainty density or clarity to language. But!

But, this morning is an exception. I keep coming back again and again to this essential mystery. I don't have new ways to explain it, or offer illustrations of it, or give application for it, or squeeze it into three points and poem. I am overwhelmed by the idea of the incarnation.

I am overwhelmed by the idea of incarnation. Partly because it is a meat cleaver mystery ~ it cuts flesh from bone. It's a fault line. Not in terms of something like salvation, or belonging, or kingdom, etc. I am not suggesting that belief in this as dogmatic formula is essential for communion. I am not suggesting that if reason or some other reading gets in the way of acceptance of this mystery that somehow we're cut off from one another and from God.

I know enough to know that I don't have this all figured out. I know enough to know that there are all sorts of faithful ways to live in response to Jesus. I know that dear friends ~ thoughtful brilliant faithful folks with pure hearts ~ approach this very differently....

But, I am suggesting that for this preacher, for my life.... the best I can do with this mystery is to proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth is fully God and fully human ~ unique, singular, unparalleled and unrepeatable. The Son of God ~ full of grace and truth. God incarnate.

If Jesus is just some uniquely gifted leader...

If Jesus is only a great teacher who reveals the heart of God....

If Jesus is the son of God in the same way that we are all sons and daughters of God....

If Jesus simply one more in the pantheon of spiritual heroes: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa....

....then all that Christianity offers is one more set of ideas in the marketplace of ideas. If the incarnation is not true than all that faith offers is one more framework for living at the Home Depot of frameworks. And any other, every other, framework is as valid.

And yet, if the incarnation is some manner of fact ~ not fantasy or fiction, not metaphor or even seminal myth ~ then everything else follows of is incidental: walking on water, raising Lazarus, feeding the five thousand, healing, teaching....

If Jesus is God incarnate then what Jesus accomplishes on the cross, or Jesus dead, or what happens in the resurrection, or at the ascension.... All of that is plausible, possible, powerful, but in some ways secondary to this essential mystery. The resurrection is just rolling over.

If Jesus is God incarnate then what Jesus taught is not just good until itself ~ but it is the very will and Word of God.

This may strike you as pedestrian. This may strike you as such a familiar part of your own spiritual landscape that you don't know what the big deal is. You may be put off and wonder why this sermon is so personal for this preacher....

There has never been a time in my life when I didn't know of Jesus. I've heard his name and rehearsed his story for as long as I can remember. I have longed for, wrestled with, ran toward, and ran away from whatever I understood to be Jesus.

So, I guess, I have a relationship with Jesus ~ troubled, tumultuous, tenuous, and at times tender. I have a personal relationship with Jesus. I am not sure that it is the same thing that evangelicals mean about a personal relationship. ;-)

But, after fifty years or twelve days the best I can offer in that relationship is the restless, hopeful, wonder, doubt, and deep trust that Jesus is God incarnate.

Fifty years or twelve days.

Wonder and deep trust.

That is all I got.

You?

Craig Barnes writes that there are two three-word phrases that can make or break us. "I love you," can bring you into the presence of angels singing about glory. "Not good enough," can bring you down not just for a day but for a lifetime. I know people who can't move forward because of such a word spoken by a mother or a father. And, I've seen marriages come apart because of their power.

Adapted from a letter by Tim Douma

But, "I love you?"

The mystery and majesty of the incarnation is that....

God looked at a bloodied and broken creation....

God looked at a foul, frail, and fallen world....

God looked at a human flesh....

God looked at me and you....

And said, "I love you."

“I love enough to let go of divinity.
I love you enough to become flesh.
I love you enough to be incarnate.
I love you enough to be born among you and to die among you.
I love you ~ even in your wonder.”

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.