

Christmas 1 2020

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Isaiah 61:10–62:5, Psalm 147, Galatians 3:23-4:7, John 1:1–18

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Today we pause and behold a wonder, a glory, a mystery unveiled. God with us. The Word become flesh, dwelling among, opening our eyes. Over the ages, as the people of God celebrate this glorious event, we have often pictured the nativity in stone, in paint, in glass. It helps us to consider the birth of Jesus by pausing over images of the nativity.

The earliest characters pictured in the nativity may surprise you. They are not Jesus, Mary and Joseph. As far as we know, the earliest image is a fourth century Sarcophagus: that is a stone coffin. Inscribed on the side of the stone coffin is an image of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes laying in a manger that looks very similar to a coffin. On either side of the manger is an animal: an ox and an ass or donkey. The ox and the ass appear in almost every image of the nativity. Even today in modern and post-modern artistic representations of the Nativity, the ox and the ass still appear.

The two animals behold the newborn Son, the Word made flesh. Why are they always present? They remind us our blindness and God's grace in opening our eyes to behold His coming in love. Isaiah writes,

The ox knows its owner,

and the donkey its master's crib,

but Israel does not know,

my people do not understand." (Isaiah 1:3)

Today as we reflect upon the coming of the Son, I want to pause over John's inditement from this morning's reading. John writes, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." (John 1:10–11) The world was blind to its Creator, and even in His coming many failed to see, failed to behold the glory of God in Jesus.

Scripture tells us a story of human blindness to God's love. This blindness is caused by a turning away from the Creator to His creation and worshipping the creation as though it was divine. Humans will defile God's creation and defile one another. Romans 1 says that their rebellion to God resulted in futile thoughts and darkened hearts (Romans 1:21). This pattern of turning from God and corrupting thoughts and darkening hearts plays out in the opening chapters of Genesis and throughout the stories of the Old Testament.

We also see this blindness in the non-biblical world. In the ancient Mesopotamian story *Gilgamesh*, the gods act in arbitrary ways often seducing or tricking humans and even enslaving them. Humans follow the pattern of the gods. In death, humans descend into the horror of darkness and loss. The arbitrary nature of the gods reappears in the Greek stories like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The gods seduce and trick one another even as they seduce and trick humans. Vengeance is a glory. It is a world of never-ending violence and deception. There is much we can learn in these tales, but we also catch a glimpse of human blindness to god and human cruelty to other humans.

The Hebrew prophets accuse God's chosen people of following in the same path of corruption and blindness of surrounding cultures. The people God chose to reveal Him, end up revealing spiritual blindness and human decadence. Today I want to pause briefly over

The Loss of Sight

The Gift of Sight

The Use of Sight

Loss of Sight

Old Testament tells story after story of blindness to God's ways and blindness to God's glory. From those complaining in the wilderness to those living in the land, God's people continued to worship idols, replicate perverse rituals, and dishonor one another. The tragic aspect of this story is that they had been raised up by God to be the people who would reveal the Lord. HE speaks to them in a way that no other nation had ever experienced.

The nations of the world were blind to the ways and purposes of God. We see this in some Biblical stories and in ancient epics like *Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*. In these stories, the gods are far from morally pure. They fight with one another and seduce one another even as they seduce humans, trick humans, put humans under spells, and delight in human violence. There are lessons to be learned from these stories. At the same time, these stories reveal a world that is blind to the creator and humans who replicate the perverse lives of the gods.

God calls Abraham out from the world of blindness to a future based on God's Word, God's promise. Abraham must follow the call of God because he cannot see the final destination. He must learn to trust the Lord. Eventually, the promise of God is realized, and Abraham and Sarah have a son. Their son Isaac becomes an image of word made sight. When Abraham is called to offer his longer for son back to God in Genesis 22, he leads his son upon Mt Moriah (the future home of the Temple). The root of the word Moriah means to see.

The story of Abraham has moved from hearing to seeing. It is on Mt. Moriah that Abraham and Isaac will both behold the provision of the Lord. They will catch a glimpse of God's provision to heal and restore humanity by His grace.

In spite of the glory of Abraham's story, his descendants will slip into the blindness of their surrounding cultures again and again. Isaiah will suggest that the people cannot see God and cannot see their own condition. They assume they are righteous, but they are covered in filthy rags. Even Isaiah must confront his own blindness as he beholds the glory of God and realizes that his lips are unclean. The holiness that the Lord expects of his people can only be realized by God's provision.

Isaiah and other prophets reveal how the blindness of God's chosen people results in even greater perversion and human oppression than their surrounding nations. Only the Lord can restore this wayward people.

The Gift of Sight

In the Gospel stories, we discover that beholding the Creator is a gift of God. He opens blind eyes. In Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, Joseph's eyes are opened to the miracle of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph will adopt Jesus as his own and follow the Spirit's guidance to preserve and protect Mary and Jesus. The Wise Men appear in Matthew's account. Their eyes have also been opened to the promise of a coming King.

The Lord speaks to them in a way that they can culturally understand through heavenly visions. At the same time, Herod, the king of the Jews is completely blind to this coming Son and though he tries to destroy him, he cannot see him and fails.

In Luke's account, the angel opens the eyes of Zechariah and Elizabeth even as their son John the Baptist will become the prophet who sees and announces the coming of Jesus. The angel opens Mary's eyes, the shepherd's eyes, and later Simeon and Anna will also have eyes to see this child of promise, Jesus the Christ.

The Gospel of John tells us the story of the Word of God before the creation of the world. The opening verses give us a grand picture of God and the Word in relation creating all things. We learn that, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." (John 1:3). The Word is God is not an idea but a person. He is the one who comes to us as the Son of God.

In one sense, John is giving us a picture of the world being recreated afresh through the redeeming action of the Son. His whole Gospel is filled with people misunderstanding or being blind to what is really happening. Jesus continues to step into Jesus rituals and festivals, revealing that these very activities have always been pointing to Him. He is the Word made Flesh. He is the Bread of Heaven. He is the Living Water. He is the Temple of the Lord.

John whole Gospel is about seeing the glory that is standing right in the midst of the people. In that sense, it is a Gospel of Transfiguration. There is no transfiguration story in John's Gospel because the whole story is Transfiguration. When blind eyes are opened, like the woman at the well, people realize Jesus is the one they've been longing for all their lives.

By God's grace, we realize this as well. Jesus is the one we've been longing for all our lives. As the Lord opens our eyes in the reading and hearing of the Gospel, we behold the Son of God, the Word of God, the Word Made Flesh who has come to dwell among us. As we behold Him, we behold His creation in a whole new light. All things bear witness of Him. As we behold Him, we behold even the Scriptures in a whole new light. The Apostolic writers see all Scriptures bearing witness to Jesus.

The Use of Sight

With this in mind, I might suggest that during this season of Christmas joy, we return again and again to the simple stories of the Nativity and ask for eyes to see. In his book, *The Blessing of Christmas*, Pope Benedict XVI has suggested that beholding the child Jesus helps us to remove some of the barriers in beholding God and to realize that in Christ, we truly behold "Immanuel" God with Us.

Here are three possibilities for meditation that might be helpful as you pause over the story of the Nativity.

First, we begin in wonder. We pause and adore the Lord who has come among us. Gregory of Nyssa warns, "Concepts create idols; only wonder understands anything." We come not to grow in intellectual arguments but as children behold the wonder of God with us.

As we pause, we might think about the mystery of Son of God entering our humanity. He knows our joys and pains and sorrows from the inside out. The writer of Hebrews says, "he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he

himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb 2:17–18).

St. Gregory the Theologian writes, "What has not been assumed has not been healed" (*Ep.* 101, 32; *SC* 208, 50). Jesus, the Son of God, the Word Made Flesh has assumed every aspect of our humanity. From birth to death, the Son of God has entered into our condition. This assures us that God knows us more intimately than we even know ourselves and He is redeeming every aspect of our human lives: the pains and the joys. All of it will ultimately be glorified in the resurrection.

Next, we might also consider Jesus as child. When God comes among us, he comes as small, vulnerable, dependent, and defenseless. Pause and think about that. The one from whom proceeds all power comes to us as powerless. He turns all human notions of power and rule and greatness upside down. He challenges our notions of greatness and calls us to humility, submission, obedience, and lives poured out in love toward one another.

Lastly, during this season of Christmas, I would suggest we might also meditate upon Jesus as Son of God. The Son of God comes among us as son of Mary and Joseph. He reveals God as a God of personal relation. This gives us a tiny glimpse of the mystery of the Trinity. The church Fathers will say that the Son of God is the Son, was the Son and will always be the Son. All notions of child, of sonship proceed from the mystery of the communion between Jesus and the Father. This relationship is made manifest in some small way in the relation of Jesus to Mary and Joseph.

This might help us to realize why the Gospel comes to us in personal relation. We also are meant to encounter the Lord in a family, in community. We are to encourage one another with songs, hymns and spiritual songs. We grow up in Christ even as we grow up in the church, the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Even our immediate families become places where Jesus can reveal himself and help us to behold the goodness of God in the love we have one for another.

During this wondrous season of joy, let us give thanks that God has opened our eyes to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Let us come and adore Him and be changed into His glorious image.