

In Him was Life

It is a Christmas tree decorating experience that is etched clearly in my memories, and not really for good reasons! For some reason we had decided to decorate the tree just before guests came for dinner. We had plenty of time, everything was prepared, we were quite relaxed, nothing to do with the bottle of Christmas tree wine that had been opened, so we went for it. But, as so often happens, getting the tree into position, getting it straight and then untangling the lights that mysteriously get tangled in the loft every year took far longer than we expected. And so, the placing of the other decorations became a bit quicker, time was running out, getting them on was the priority and we could sort them later. My favourite decoration is of that well-known Christmas story character ... the hot, topless merman with a sparkly tail! We bought him in San Francisco, and he reminds me of the huge freedom I enjoy in our society, of great holidays and of friendship and love. He's always the first to be unwrapped, the last to be wrapped up and usually one of the last to be put on the tree. He's quite heavy so a substantial branch must be found for him. The branch was found and he was put on carefully but quickly (not by me but this isn't a blame story ...) and then everything went into slow motion. He wasn't quite on enough and with his weight he slipped off the branch and fell towards the floor, just managing to miss the carpet and hit the stone hearth of

the fireplace, where he split into three pieces. Silent Night had nothing on the silence that descended, as both of us stood there transfixed to the spot. The fragility of this one decoration had threatened the whole of Christmas!

Christmas itself is fragile: one missed card, one wrong present, a minute too long or short on the brussels, an hour too long or too short on the turkey, too many sherries before dinner and the fragile perfection of Christmas that we all secretly dream of is ruined. Which is of course exactly like our lives, more fragile than you and I would like to admit.

St. John, who we heard this evening, tells a very different Christmas story from the one St. Luke tells. It's not better than Luke's, just different. We need both.

Luke tells the Christmas story with facts; John tells it with poetry.

Luke tells it looking from the outside; John tells it looking from the inside.

Luke tells us what happened; John wants us to reflect on what it means.

Luke describes an event; John describes a way of being.

Luke tells a story of particulars – “In those days” and “in that region.” It's about a particular place, time, and people; John's story is cosmic – “In the beginning....” It's a creation story.

Luke has us focus on the child Jesus; John asks us to consider what it means for **us** to “become children of God,” for the Word of God to dwell in our flesh.

John asks us on this Holy Night to look up from the manger. Imagine if we could open the roof of this church and see the stars, the galaxies, the cosmos, that’s where John wants us to begin. Because the life he is going to be talking about is immense, abundant, unending. He tells us, “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” “For John, Jesus came to bring abundant life. John continually emphasizes this abundance, imaginatively pointing to it in many ways: large quantities of wine out of water, the Spirit blowing freely, water welling up into eternal life, surplus baskets of bread, perfume filling a house, a huge catch of fish, and more.”¹ He calls it eternal life, and we hear the first sounds of it on this night in this baby’s cry.

The fullest expression of this life is the love between the Father and the Son into which all are invited. An invitation into this abundance of life that is presented to us in this baby. As John Donne wrote that Mary had “immensity

¹ David Ford, *John*, p.39

cloister'd in her womb," and Thomas Traherne declared "a world of joy, hid in a manger," as we look on this baby, we look on life itself, the creator become creation. Life, living among us.

And because of that, because of this new baby, life itself can never be the same again. For John means more than physical existence, although he doesn't mean any less than that either. He will return to this theme at the end of his Gospel when Jesus declares, "I AM the Way, and the Truth, and the Life." He will have Jesus say, "I have come that they may have life and life in all its fullness."

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, pitched his tent among us. The Word became created, had feet, and hands, was fully fragile human. So that in our humanity we could comprehend life: God. The Word made flesh mediates new life that is the result of reconciliation with God.

John tells us the result of this life bursting from within creation, this life that even death cannot destroy, is that you and I have new life, we are reborn as children of God. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power 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."

Life. Life and light. John tells us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it, it also the promise of this Holy Night that the darkness can never overcome the light. No matter the fragility and darkness we may be surrounded by. In a world of violence, hatred, and suspicion, ever more divided and hostile; in our own community; in the lives we each live, the fragility of health worries, of relationship breakdowns, of job insecurity, of money worries; in the fragility of our planet, our fragile ecosystem that won't just endlessly tolerate our extreme activities of extraction, consumption, pollution and destruction.

It is exactly into that fragility that the life and light of the Christ-Child, of Jesus, shines, and lights the path to our own life.

The merman got glued back together, Alleluia!, and every year we can see the faint marks where he was put back together. On this Holy Night, you and I are put back together, we are drawn into the mystery of love that God with us in the Christ child summons us to. We are released to see the glory of our own fragility in Jesus Christ, God with us. We are shown what life with God is like, how strong the light is and how weak the darkness. In the cry of the baby, the Word made flesh, on this Holy Night we hear the call of life and light

Midnight Mass
Year A
Isaiah 9:2-7
Titus 2:11-14
John 2:1-14

and love. It is the call to all of us whoever we are and wherever we have come from and wherever we are going. Here is your life, come, let us adore him!