

December 24, 2014
Christmas Eve Homily
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Pretend for a moment that you have never read or heard the Christmas story. Pretend that you know nothing about the Bible or Christianity. And then imagine yourself reading the Gospel of Luke for the very first time, with no one to explain it to you or guide you.

In the first chapter of Luke, you read that there are two boys that are going to be born under some miraculous circumstances. One will be born to a woman who is barren and very old; the other will be born to a young woman who is still a virgin. You know from the author's preface that he has compiled his narrative from eyewitnesses, so he has not made this up. These are not myths, this is history.

Both boys will be born into godly Jewish households to parents who are described as righteous and favored. And not only are the births of these boys going to be miraculous, but their lives are going to be very important because angels start appearing to the parents. Zachariah, one of the fathers, is visited by an angel while he is burning incense as part of his priestly duties in the temple. Mary, one of the mothers, is greeted by an angel who has a name, Gabriel. From the different angels descriptions of what these sons' births will bring, it sounds like they are both destined for greatness. The one named John who will be greatly used by the Lord, and turn people's hearts to Him. The one named Jesus is going to sit on a throne and reign forever.

John is born at home, and all the neighbors and relatives rejoice with his parents. Jesus' birth comes in a foreign city with no family or neighbors around. But some shepherds have been visited by angels and told about the amazing birth, and so they rush over and find the stable where Jesus was born and thank God for what they have seen.

And remembering that you have never read the Bible before or have any knowledge of Christianity, you might be inclined to wonder at that point: Which of these boys is going to be the main character in this story? You've now read about miracles and angels and prophecies about their importance and the working of the Holy Spirit in each of their lives, now which one of them will carry the story from here? And Luke 3 starts with a description of John's life and actions when he grows up. And people come out to the wilderness to see him and be baptized by him, and they have the same question: Are you the important one? Are you the one who God has promised to send, the Christ?

And at this point in the story, it becomes crystal-clear who is going to be the main focus. Because John answers essentially, "I've been called to do a few things, but there's someone who will come after me who is mightier than me; someone I am not worthy of." In another Gospel, John says that "I must decrease and he must increase." And to underline his point, Luke tells us that Jesus comes to be baptized by John and a voice from heaven speaks to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

So why was Jesus the One and not John? Why did John have a role to prepare the people for Jesus, and Jesus have the much greater role of King, Messiah, and Savior? This past Sunday, Tom Rubino preached about the importance of Jesus being a human being, and how His humanity allowed Him to stand in our place as a substitute; one who knew all the temptations and trials of a person, yet remain sinless and perfectly fulfilling God's law. Well, Jesus was fully human, but Jesus was also fully divine. John was the greatest among men according to Jesus, but he was not God. The main

thing that separated Jesus from John was that Jesus came from heaven, having always existed as the supreme power over all, was equal in substance, power, and glory to the other two persons of the Godhead - God the Father and God the Holy Spirit; He is God the Son. Jesus' birth was a one-of-a-kind event, where the awesome, uncontainable, magnificent Creator of the entire universe was given an 8 pound human baby's frame, and entrusted to two peasants to raise. The One who was completely self-sustaining and had no needs/wants was now dependent on a young girl to feed him. The all-powerful Being with no weaknesses now had a body that could be broken, pierced, & killed.

Do you believe that Jesus was fully man and fully God? It's a hard teaching, equally hard as the doctrine of the Trinity. The early church took a long time to define just how Jesus' humanity and divinity existed together, and many of the early heresies leaned too far to one side or the other. There was a man named Arius in the 4th century. He went around teaching that Jesus was a created being, that He was not God; not equal to God the Father, even if He was a wonderful example and a great teacher. Arius even set his heretical teachings to music, he rewrote the lyrics of the popular tavern songs of the day so that the common people could sing them and understand his teachings. Well when the Council of Nicea was convened in 325, the church leaders were trying to determine whether Arius' views were Biblical or not. At one point Arius started singing his songs. Some of the church leaders closed their ears, others left the room. Now as legend goes there was one Bishop, the Bishop of Mytra, whose name was Nicholas. Nicholas was a godly man who believed the Scriptures and would not tolerate this teaching, so he walked over to Arius and calmly knocked him to the floor with a punch in the mouth. Not the most godly response, but many church historians believe that this was the turning point in the Council because both Nicholas and Arius were expelled from the proceedings, and with Arius gone, the group could come together and write the defining statement that is the Nicene Creed.

But what I didn't mention is that Nicholas became a saint in the church, and was known for giving gifts to poor children. In fact, he's possibly the most well-known saint of all time, even if we've completely changed his image and his legacy, and given him a sleigh with reindeer to deliver gifts once a year. Yes, the whole point of that story is that if you try to teach that Jesus was not fully God, Santa Claus might punch you in the mouth.

We've heard most of the Christmas story read throughout the service tonight. But let's take a minute to hear from other parts of the Bible that answer the questions: Why did God become a man? Why did Jesus come to earth? What was His mission?

(PP) Mark 10:45 - *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."*

1 John 3:5 - *"You know that He appeared to take away sins."*

1 John 3:8b - *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."*

John 3:16 - *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*

Galatians 4:4-5 - *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."*

There's one more similarity between the lives of John and Jesus that I didn't mention earlier: Both John and Jesus are killed because they are godly men speaking truth to power and those in authority at the time could not handle being challenged. John is beheaded, Jesus is crucified. But John's death merely ends his life; his friends mourn and the world loses a great prophet, but ultimately everything moves on. With Jesus' death, though, history changes. John's body stays in the grave, Jesus' body comes back to life. Because He defeats death. Because He was perfect and because He was God, death could not hold Him. And as those verses we just read told us, His life is a

ransom and eternal life is given to those who believe in Him, He takes away our sin, and He destroys the works of the devil. We are redeemed and adopted into God's family, all because the God-Man came and gave Himself up in our place. That is the miracle of Christmas, the gift of Jesus and His salvation.

You may not get that big gift that you had your heart set on tomorrow morning. Maybe your parents didn't buy you a Daisy Red Rider BB Gun with compass and stock. But you've been given the greatest gift that anyone can receive. Something that nothing and no one in heaven or earth can take away from you: a sinless Savior who loves you so much that He would endure all humiliation and pain to come to earth and die in your place. The free gift includes the faith to believe and the assurance that your eternal destiny is secure.