

Shifting From Jesus' Birth to Ours

John 1:10-18 (January 5, 2019)

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10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Historical Context

Notice that John's "Christmas story" dallies not with angels or shepherds and seems to know nothing of a young mother or magi. Indeed, John's story is hardly about the birth of Jesus at all but instead focuses on the difference that birth makes for all of us. There are, on the whole, just two crucial lines that deal with Jesus' birth and what we often call the Incarnation. John 1:1 is the first: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God." The second comes at verse 14: "And the Word" -- that was with God and is God -- "became flesh and dwelt among us." There it is: John's Christmas story, the story of God becoming human, taking on our lot and our life that we might live and love and struggle and die with hope.

Theme: Shifting From Jesus' Birth to Ours

John spends more time on the significance of Christmas by shifting attention from Jesus' birth to ours. In fact, John is actually less interested in the birth of a babe at Bethlehem than he is in the birth of us as children of God. Versus 10 to 13 say that Jesus came that we might become children of God. Children that is, who are not dominated by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, not defined by our limitations or hurts, and whose destinies are not controlled by others. Rather, we are those individuals who know ourselves to be God's own beloved children.

To fully appreciate the significance of what John is saying, I think we need to distinguish briefly between those things that *describe* us and those that *define* us. All too often, I believe, we allow certain elements of our life to dominate and define us. Things like our upbringing or interests, our good experiences and our bad ones, our current marital state or our sexuality, our past triumphs or tragedies. Don't get me wrong, these things matter and are what I would call descriptively true. But all too often we allow them not just to describe parts of our life but to define us completely. In these verses, John invites us to hold all of the ordinary things that describe us as important but insufficient, as valuable but partial, as meaningful but not definitive. What *is* definitive -- and therefore more important than all the good or bad things we carry with us -- is that God has called us God's own children, individuals who hold infinite worth in God's eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God's beloved world.