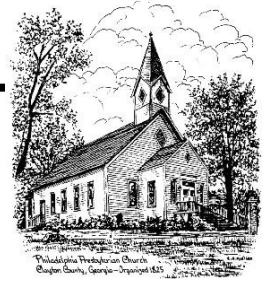


Sermon Notes . . .



Sunday, January 15, 2012

What, Who and Why

John 1:9-18

A philosopher once had the following dream. First Aristotle appeared, and the philosopher said to him, "Could you give me a fifteen-minute capsule sketch of your entire philosophy?" To the philosopher's surprise, Aristotle gave him an excellent exposition in which he compressed an enormous amount of material into a mere fifteen minutes. But then the philosopher raised a certain objection which Aristotle couldn't answer. Confounded, Aristotle disappeared. Then Plato appeared. The same thing happened again, and the philosophers' objection to Plato was the same as his objection to Aristotle. Plato also couldn't answer it and disappeared. Then all the famous philosophers of history appeared one-by-one and our philosopher refuted every one with the same objection. After the last philosopher vanished, our philosopher said to himself, "I know I'm asleep and dreaming all this. Yet I've found a universal refutation for all philosophical systems! Tomorrow when I wake up, I will probably have forgotten it, and the world will really miss something!" With an iron effort, the philosopher forced himself to wake up, rush over to his desk, and write down his universal refutation. Then he jumped back into bed with a sigh of relief. The next morning when he awoke, he went over to the desk to see what he had written. It was, "Oh, yeah. That's what you say."

Down through the ages the main question for most philosophies and religions has been, "What do we do with our flesh?" Plato gave birth to philosophy by saying you can think your way out of the flesh. You can, through philosophical contemplation, rise above your lower nature. Now, why would you want to? Well, said Plato, because what's real is not this stuff, but the Idea world beyond this one. So close your eyes, get comfortable, and think your way toward the real world, a place for which our world is only a flickering shadow.

A similar drive may be behind today's infatuation with "spirituality." So many times in so many different ways contemporary thinkers and artists try to convince us that spiritual disciplines (higher thinking) can help us to climb out of the muck-and-mire of the material world, and rise up to a higher, more spiritual realm. Here's just one example: think about the movie "The Matrix" (a movie I really enjoy). The hero in that movie, Neo, has to realize that the physical does not necessarily control him. What seems real isn't. There's a higher, real world to be had, and to reach it he has to escape from the computer generated program that is the matrix, that makes up our so-called "real" world. The point is made: forget about the false flesh, escape its limitations, and then you can start flying through the sky and dodging bullets; it's an almost universal fantasy, to fly from this stuff and become godlike.

But if we are really listening to the Christmas story, really listening to John's beautiful words, this isn't how it really is at all. Bethlehem, the manger, the birth, and the Word made flesh point us toward an-

other possibility. Since we ARE human, frail, and sinful we can't really go up to God. So Christ, having become one of us, means God comes down to us. This is something Plato would never have accepted philosophically.

Now before we go any further, I want to say that this Word made flesh theology, also called Incarnation theology, comes from the Gospel according to John, where it shows up in the Prologue, the famous first verses that begin, "In the beginning was the Word...." One of the challenges in first generation Christianity was to communicate the idea of Jesus to a group of people who had no connection to Judaism. To the Jews, the concept of a Messiah was powerful. But to the Greeks, it meant little or nothing. So how do you talk about the coming of the Messiah to folks who don't know what that means? John is trying to convey the idea of Jesus to a Greek audience, and he is putting it into their terms. While the Greeks might not understand the Messiah, they do understand the idea of "logos." "Logos" in Greek means reason or mind and that idea carried a lot of meaning in Greek culture. So when John writes that the "logos" was with God and the "logos" was God, he's making a statement to the Greeks. When he says "the logos became flesh and dwelt among us," he's saying to them that what made God, God, that by which God made the universe and all things in it, became a person. The Divine Word was born and lived.

Now I know we have to make a big leap of faith when we consider the resurrection, but clearly we must make as large of a jump at our faith's beginning with the incarnation. John's Gospel doesn't wait until the end to focus our attention on the glorious impossible possible on which our faith is anchored. From its very first moment, Christian faith emerges straight from God, straight from the miraculous and divine. We may cut off the bookends, the first and the last, the Word became flesh and Christ was raised from the dead anchors of Christianity and make a more reasonable religion, but it will struggle to say and do what the Christian faith can when it rises to its full height. What above all our faith says is that nothing has the power to stop God from reaching us and pulling us to himself. As Paul said it, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom. 8:38-39. Christ in human flesh is the WHAT!

Life is not what it appears. People in the world or either operated by God's Spirit or the spirit of Satan. There is no such thing as independent "I." Our life becomes the right life through the cross of Christ putting Satan out of us and we become joined to the Spirit of Christ. This does not put us in a relationship with Christ. The Bible says we become one with him so we are union with Him. 1 Cor. 6:17, "he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him." As a result Jesus Christ lives His life in and through us. We are the containers and not the contents. I say this because the Bible calls us clay pots, branches body members slaves to the Master and wives. That is why I say we have to make a big leap of faith when we consider the Incarnation but especially the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit to fill all of us as He did at Pentecost. We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph 2:10). And we have this treasure in clay pots to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us (2 Cor 4:7). Divine influence is the WHO!. Who is pressing against us to awaken us to this life called being Christian. Who is working through us to make Jesus Christ appear once again to world of humans?

So even if you can't believe with your head, embrace faith with your heart. It's the heart that accepts still the mystery and wonder of God and life. Not once in all of human history did God ever convince an individual to believe by persuading the mind. The surest way to a person's faith is through the heart.

One of the greatest journalists of the last generation, the late Bernard Levin, described how, when he was a small boy, a great celebrity came to visit his school. The headmaster, thinking perhaps to impress, called the young Levin to the platform in front of the whole school. The celebrity, thinking perhaps to be kind, asked the little boy what he'd had for breakfast. That was easy, or so it seemed. "Matzobrei," replied Levin. Matzobrei is a typical central European Jewish dish, made of egg fried with matzo wafers, brown sugar and cinnamon; Levin's immigrant mother had continued to make it even after years of living in London. It was, to him, a perfectly ordinary word for a perfectly ordinary meal. The celebrity, ignorant of such cuisine, thinks he must have misheard; he asks the question again. Young Bernard, puzzled now and anxious, gives the same answer. The celebrity looks concerned, and glances at the headmaster. What is this word he's saying? The headmaster, adopting a there-there-little-man tone, asks him once more what he had for breakfast. Now dismayed, not knowing what he's done wrong, and wanting to burst into tears, the boy says once more the only thing he can say, since it's the truth: "Matzobrei." An exchange of strange glances on the platform, and the now terrified little boy is sent back to his place. The incident is never referred to again, but it stays in his memory as a horrible ordeal.

John's gospel isn't about Jesus speaking the truth and everyone saying "Of course! Why didn't we realize it before?" It is about God shining his clear, bright torch into the darkness of our world, our lives, our hearts, our imaginations, and the darkness not comprehending it. It's about God, God-as-a-little-child, speaking the word of truth, and nobody knowing what he's talking about.

The Word came to us but the world didn't accept it; the world is made through him but the world doesn't know him; he came to his own, and his own didn't receive him. Jesus is born into a world where everyone is deaf and blind to him and what he's saying; but there is grace, and those who allow his words to challenge, rescue, heal and transform them, those who allow his ministry to include them, those who desire another better and purer will to guide theirs, will find themselves born and living to a new way. As John writes, "As many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, who were born not of human will or flesh, but of God." So we shouldn't imagine that the world divides naturally into those who can understand what Jesus is saying that those who can't. By ourselves, none of us can. The truth is, by nature we simply refuse to believe Christ or anyone else for that matter should come first; we refuse to step forward in God's service. By nature we want to serve self because we see no beauty in Christ Jesus and no truth in his words. But once we fall under Divine influence, once grace opens our heart and we hear Christ's word as Word of Life, then we seek to put first things first, God's will before ours, service before self, and compassion before carelessness then the why of the incarnation and resurrection becomes real to us. If we are to be of any use to God we must allow the truth of the incarnation to overcome us, the, that is the WHAT; then we sense the WHO, the Holy Spirit pressing within and without; so that the WHY, the life of Christ in us can be manifest in our mortal human flesh.

That to me is staggering. God did not just come to save us or we would all be just little tin soldiers, frozen in one pose, never to act again in any way. THAT IS NOT WHO WE ARE. Even the disciples had a hard time with this when in John 14:22 RSV. "Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" They had no idea that the everywhere present, all powerful God would manifest Himself through every believer throughout the world. Col. 1- " (I can say this to) I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the **word of God fully known, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations** but now made manifest to his saints. **27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.** The hope for glory is our hope for heaven, And we know we are going to heaven because the Christ in us bear witness, that is He tells us, we are his own. If it was not for Christ in us we would not have a hope for heaven.

When the wife of missionary Adoniram Judson told him that a newspaper article likened him to some of the apostles, Judson replied, "I do not want to be like a Paul...or any mere man. I want to be like Christ...I want to follow Him only, copy His teachings, drink in His Spirit, and place my feet in His footprints...Oh, to be more like Christ!" Then how so?

Moody was to have a campaign in England. An elderly pastor protested, "Why do we need this 'Mr. Moody'? He's uneducated, inexperienced, etc. Who does he think he is anyway? Does he think he has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?" A younger, wiser pastor rose and responded, "No, but the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on Mr. Moody."

Does God have a monopoly on you?