

December 25th, 2022

John 1:1-14 “The Light of All People”

When I was a kid, one of the best things about the holiday season was those stop motion animated Christmas specials on TV! Remember those? We have Arthur Rankin and Jules Bass to thank for those classic holiday gems. *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* was the first one to air on television in 1964. My personal favorite was *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, which came out in 1970. A lot of their animated specials were inspired by popular Christmas songs and stories. For example, “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” was based on a 1939 story by Robert May. Ten years later, Max Fleisher, best known as the creator of Betty Boop, produced a traditionally animated 8-minute film called *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* that was a word-for-word presentation of May’s story. And that’s when Johnny Marks wrote the Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer song which became hugely popular. But you know why you don’t see that Max Fleisher cartoon airing non-stop on television during the holiday season? Because it wasn’t nearly as awesome and iconic as those Rankin-Bass stop motion animated specials! Amen? And they were weird too which is why I think I liked them so much. A few years ago, *Indie-Wire* magazine ranked those Rankin-Bass specials from “appropriately festive” to “totally messed up.” And a lot

of them were “messed up” when you think about it! The villains were terrifying! But I’m grateful for Rankin and Bass because I believe the first time I consciously remember hearing and understanding the Christmas story was when I watched their 1968 classic *The Little Drummer Boy*. The writer of that *Indie-Wire* magazine article wrote, “While it does not ooze the red-and-green pine-scented holiday cheer of the other specials, I suppose ‘Little Drummer Boy’ gets appropriate points for actually having to do with Jesus.”

The problem with *The Little Drummer Boy* is that he is not in any of the Biblical birth narratives, which, I must say disappointed me when I compared it to the source material. And how did I know where to look to find the source material? From another classic animated holiday special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Linus quoted a passage from Luke chapter 2 when he told the Christmas story during their school’s Christmas pageant. So I read Luke chapter 2 and “what to my wondering eyes did *not* appear?” The little drummer boy. You know what else did not appear in Luke? Wise men! What’s that all about? That didn’t make any sense because our little nativity set we had at home and every other nativity set I ever saw had three wise men and three shepherds kneeling before baby Jesus in a manger! Unbeknownst to me, that is when I took my first steps into the wonderful world of biblical scholarship. That’s when I discovered

that the wise men were hiding out in *Matthew's* gospel. But guess what missing from Matthew's gospel? Shepherds *and* no little drummer boy either.

There are four gospels. Three of them, Mark, Matthew and Luke, are very similar to one another in the way that they lay out the timeline of Jesus' earthly ministry. We call those the "synoptic gospels." Mark is the most concise and straightforward. Matthew, the book we're going over in Bible study is written for a Jewish audience, and the message is, "This guy Jesus? He's the messiah you've been looking for." Luke is written for a non-Jewish audience and his message is, "Let me explain how Jesus is a messiah for all people." Only two of the synoptic gospels have the story of Jesus' birth – Matthew and Luke. There are similarities, but there are also some significant differences. A couple of you caught a glimpse of this last week when I said, "Mary was of no special lineage" and "Mary was not described as righteous." But you also heard me say, "At least according to Luke's gospel." Good job. By catching that, *you* were practicing biblical scholarship too!

Now, if you want to participate in some *wild and crazy* biblical scholarship, we're definitely in the right gospel this week. John doesn't seem to care *at all* what the other gospel writers said or didn't say. He doesn't care about virgin births or mangers or choirs of angels or shepherds

or wise men or little drummer boys! When it comes to Jesus, John goes much further back than his birth. He goes back to the first creation story in the book of Genesis. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning when God was creating the heavens and the earth.” John’s gospel starts out with similar words - “In the beginning was the Word.” The writer goes on to say, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 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.” This first part of John’s gospel is written in poetic form. Some scholars say it’s a poem about the relationship between God, the Word, and the Light and that this sets the tone for the entire theme of John’s gospel.

First of all, let’s talk about “the Word.” Last week when Barbara Stevens was visiting, she said that she missed my Greek lessons. Well here’s the most important Greek lesson that you need to learn - Greek doesn’t always translate well into English. Neither does Hebrew or Aramaic or any other ancient biblical language. The Greek word here in John that’s translated in English as “word” is “logos.” Okay, that sounds pretty straightforward. But it’s not. I’ve used this example before, but the Greek word “koinonia” that gets translated

as “fellowship,” means a lot more than *just* “fellowship.” Same for the Hebrew word “shalom.” It gets translated as “peace,” but it means a lot more than *just* peace. In this case, “logos” is translated as “word,” but it means a lot more than just word. It means wisdom, logic, knowledge, reason, revelation. According to John, this Word, this “Logos” is foundational to the fabric of creation itself, which believe it or not, was not a new thing in that time, place, and culture.

The philosopher Zeno, founder of classical stoicism, believed that the logos was the active reason or logic pervading and animating the entire universe. The stoics believed the logos permeated all things including humans, who possessed the *divine* logos. Remember last week when I said, “the light of God in me recognizes the light of God in you?” That’s what this is. God spoke all of creation into existence with the logos ... the divine word. According to John, that which came into being from this logos is *life* and that “the life was the light for all people.” Not just for one religious or ethnic group- but for *all* people. So the concept of “logos” as a divine creative force wasn’t new to the Greeks. They’d say, “Oh yeah, of course the world was created through the divine logos. That’s a given.” What was strange, radical and scandalous to the Greeks, though, was the idea that this logos could take on physical form. As far as the Greeks were concerned, spirit is good, but flesh is bad. If the

logos came to earth in a physical form, it would lose its divine perfection.

This concept was also radical and scandalous for the Jewish people. They were okay with the idea that God could dwell among God's people. There were plenty of examples of God interacting with humans. But after the Exodus, God's interaction with humans was limited to the Temple. When someone like John comes along and starts talking about God *taking on our form* ... our humanity ... that was borderline blasphemy. But here was John saying that the dwelling place of God isn't just *where* God's people are, but it's *who* God's people are. How can this be though? How is it even possible?

Here's the heart of John's message and why I think it's a good thing to consider on Christmas day. I know we want to hear about mangers, shepherds, angels and wise men, but John's "Christmas story" is just as important. John is saying that we are all invited into God's eternal activity and in doing so, we are adopted. And being adopted by God isn't like an initiation into some sort of club. It means that we are joining in God's eternal work to redeem Creation. *We* become an important part of God's redeeming work. We become "Joint heirs with Jesus." In the 8th chapter of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes,

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with *our* spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

So here we are on this day where we celebrate the birth of the Word who was made flesh. This is a day to ask questions like, “What in my life, in my community, in my world can be made new? How can we as joint heirs with Jesus participate in the ongoing work of creation? How are we being created, and re-created even now? How has the Word made its home among us? How has the word found a home in me? Where is the Incarnation of God’s word and God’s light today? Well today, on this celebration of Christ’s birth, the word and the light is in a manger in a stable, among shepherds. It is in a small village, with strange foreigners bearing gifts, amidst the tyranny of a jealous king.

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be all glory giv’n!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing
O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord!