

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

LAKE WORTH, FLORIDA

The Eve of Christmas I (Dec. 29, 2007)

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A MEDITATION ON JOHN 1: 1-14

Some time ago a *NEW YORK TIMES* commentator wrote these words: "In their most extreme forms, monotheistic religions are deeply intolerant. If there is only one right way of doing things, every other way is wrong. If we are good, others are evil." She could have expanded her comments by noting that within the three great Western monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), their own extremist branches or denominations are quite intolerant with respect to fellow believers. Ultra-orthodox Jews reject Reform Judaism as inauthentic; ultra-right wing Christians (such as most fundamentalists) denounce more moderate and progressive expressions of Christianity (such as, nearly all Episcopalians), and many militant Muslims disown Islamic modernists.

In reaction to such intolerance and exclusivity, many well-intentioned people declare that all the world's religions teach the same thing; they just have different names for the identical "higher power." However, after one truly studies world religions, it is easily discovered that this simplistic declaration is false. Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, do not share with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam a trust in the personal Creator as portrayed in the Bible and Qur'an. The meanings of the word "love" often vary significantly. When we undertake comparative studies of global religions, we discover that they all share very similar questions about existence, but their answers are often incompatible.

Of course, this is not what the public and religious dabblers want to hear. Generally speaking, people do not want to have to study seriously any matters of religion. The preferred approach is to be handed a package of easy beliefs that claim to be objectively correct, and by implication, that all other beliefs are mistaken. Such extreme religious forms (whether monotheistic or not) are the ones that are growing today. The majority wants no uncertainty or ambiguity or informed faith; the mainstream demands to be as knowledgeable as God - with godlike certainty - and, of course, at no more than an elementary school level.

Regrettably, with just minimal effort, countless thinking people prematurely throw together their own religious beliefs often resulting in a nice try, but, at best, convictions permeated with significant inadequacies and inconsistencies. Continuing study guided by truly qualified mentors is a rarity. However, they are usually satisfied with whatever they invent and then categorize them as "spirituality."

As one of our readings tonight, we have heard the introductory verses of the Gospel According to Saint John. This remarkable poetry is a summarizing interpretation of all the events and folklore related to the Nativity of Jesus. Unconcerned with angels, human biology, stables and shepherds, this "Prologue" to John's Gospel provides a heartfelt yet mindful focus for our current liturgical celebrations. Undeniably, faithful Christians translate and comprehend this focal point in different ways, but the focus is provided and guides us well.

In a few words, my grasp of what we are about these Christmas days is this: in the course of time, about two thousand years ago, the Creator's purpose for all human beings, poetically speaking God's very *Word*, was personified in Jesus. In the New Testament portraits of his life and ministry, we witness the glory of God's light and plan for us all. We do not need to look any further for God's common plan for our individual lives! For two millennia, we Christians have confessed that Jesus the Christ is the unique, exemplary image of God, like a son who has uniquely disclosed his Father's personal and active Will of love.

As you and I worship together tonight, we need no greater precision, definitions, or formulations; for, with the illuminating Gospel According to John we are gathered, not in a laboratory or library, but here in prayer. With the *Word Made Flesh* nurturing us this very hour, you and I may discover the dynamic light and love of God. Moreover, we may more fully comprehend our own shared identity as

daughters and sons of God, a new fellowship of people called to become more and more like their Lord. Especially here, we are nurtured as the Creator's own family - as we listen to his *Word*, share the Eucharistic bread and wine, and reflect carefully on the Gospel's meanings for our daily lives. No abstract idea this *Word*; rather, if willing, you and I experience here and now the living presence of Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

You and I will inevitably disagree as we seek to understand the implications of this *Word* of God. The Creator has chosen to NOT spell out the details, but to let human beings sort it all out and disagree in love, generation after generation. I am not at all interested in claiming that my understanding, my Faith, is absolutely correct, that other thorough interpretations are utterly false, or that other world religions are evil and damnable.

I *am* persuaded that Christ's unique Way of living in mutual loving relationships with God and one's neighbors is on course for all humanity. I believe this with all my heart and mind. I believe further that we may enthusiastically share this view of life without mean-spirited condemnations of others' beliefs. Were we truly willing to differ, various Christian gatherings, as well as those of other religions, would have a far more positive impact on human communities than they have thus far. Nonetheless, in our own small ways, such a Spirit of loving tolerance and humility can begin with you, and with me, in our own varied, daily associations.

Many an evening at home we watch televised science programs: the wonders of the cosmos and particularly the marvels of life forms on our planet. There is no small degree of violence in the universe and among Earth's creatures. However, there is beauty and degrees of order, cooperation, and tenderness.

One might react to such information with an informed atheistic faith that there is absolutely no purpose or meaning to it all; existence happened, and no further explanation is needed.

Another informed, but theistic response, is this: despite creation's mysteries (including built-in violence) a personal Creator has chosen to reveal to humanity *the Divine intentions for interpersonal, human relationships* - first through the Hebrew prophets - and then uniquely through God's Exemplar, Jesus the Christ. The birth of this Jesus, God's Word in the flesh, is what we celebrate during this brief, Christmas Season.

We creatures view those science programs through our own faith-filled lenses - perhaps as atheists, perhaps as Christian theists, perhaps as others; we human beings have that choice. Those of us gathered here have chosen to view them - as well as every moment of our own lives - as disciples of the "Word made flesh" who lived among us, full of grace and truth. Thanks be to God for providing us with Jesus Christ Our Lord! Amen.