

I realized a couple days ago that I went through the entire run up to Christmas without watching any Christmas specials on TV this year; none of the classics like Rudolf or Peanuts and none of the new ones like Shrek or Prep and Landing. These shows can be entertaining to watch, and they usually have some sort of a good message to them too. Most all of them involve some threat to Christmas and an unlikely hero who manages to save the day against all odds. But if we turn our attention to our Bible readings for today we realize that there is nothing that can actually threaten Christmas.

Even though it's the day to celebrate our church's namesake we discover that there is a powerful message for Christmas too. But first, we have to ask ourselves a question. Who wrote the things in the Bible attributed to St. John?

John the disciple of Jesus is the obvious answer, and it's the one suggested by church history as well. A first century Christian by the name of Polycarp appears to have been an acquaintance and disciple of the apostle John. He is our closest link connecting the gospel of John and the three letters of John to the disciple John. However, while legends abound, we

know almost nothing certain about Polycarp. As early as the year 130 we have people questioning whether these writings do actually come from John.

There's something ironic about questioning who wrote these works. Because not only do they not say who wrote them, they are actually written for the purpose of keeping the author unknown! In 2<sup>nd</sup> John and 3<sup>rd</sup> John the writer only refers to himself as "the elder". The Gospel of John only refers to the author as the "disciple whom Jesus loved". And while 1<sup>st</sup> John is deliberately written from a first person perspective that person remains anonymous - only to be known as we read in our second reading, a reliable witness.

You could argue that this anonymity is for safety sake - Christians are being persecuted by both Romans and Jews and the author doesn't want his words to be traced back to him. But I don't believe that is the case. In those days they didn't get too worked up about things like evidence and proof before torturing and executing someone.

No, the anonymity of the author is part of the author's writing strategy. He wants us -readers far far away and centuries later- to learn something about God through him, an

eyewitness. He insists on being part of the background, so that through him we can be in the story too. Ultimately he wants to feel close to us the reader and us feel close to him and close to God.

Hear again the beginning of our second lesson, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:1-3)

I said before that this day to commemorate John actually speaks to Christmas. It speaks to Christmas far more powerfully and profoundly than the birth story of Jesus with angels, shepherds and wise men. Because all of that, while significant, is surface detail. What does Christmas mean? What is its purpose? Why is it important? Those are answered by John.

Jesus, the Word of God, according to the Gospel of John, was made flesh. Why? So that real living people like you and

me could see and touch and hear God in our own form and in our own world.

The birth story of Jesus that we read on Christmas Eve has almost reached fairy tale status. There's the supernatural angels and lowly shepherds, a virgin mother and stars in the sky. All of which makes a great story, but a story no different from a fairy tale. A fragile fairy tale no more stable in most people's minds than many other cultural Christmas traditions like Santa Claus.

John's not interested in validating or defending that. He really doesn't care about Jesus' birth story. He cares that you know this: You cannot reach God. You cannot understand God. You cannot be in relationship with God. And God knows all of those limitations you have. Therefore God came to you. And therefore you can now fully know God. You can now be in an actual relationship with God.

In our second reading John no sooner makes this point than he makes a sudden shift. He talks about sin. "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1:8-9) You

may know those words well from when they were regularly used in the confession and forgiveness.

Why take such a turn? Why link the coming of Christ in one breath and then talk about sin in the next? Because John wants you to fully know Jesus and be in relationship with him. But as I mentioned before, can you by your own power be in relationship with Jesus? Can you reach God on your own?

No. You can't. It is only by recognizing our limits, our brokenness, our separation that the door stays open for God to reach us. The moment we think we've got it we close the door and the relationship starts to suffer. And remember, in John's writings sin is not so much actions that you do that are naughty or bad, sin is a state of being that wants to exist without God. Sin is wanting to be your own savior by your own power. If you don't see that constant tendency common to all of us then you really are trapped in your sins.

Have you ever had someone sin against you but not realize it; or perhaps refuse to realize it? Perhaps it's a co-worker whose part of the project is over budget and past due. The whole team is taking the hit and suffering but this person always manages to have excuses. It's never his or her fault but

someone else's. You may even be the target and while blame may not stick to the other person it does somehow end up sticking to you.

Are you ever going to be able to have a good relationship with that person? Can you be that person's friend? No. No matter how much you forgive that person, and no matter how much you work to have a good relationship, until that person recognizes his or her destructive behavior you can't do anything. That person needs to recognize his or her sin. Then and only then can a healthy relationship develop.

Perhaps sometimes it is we who blame others for our failings. Woe to us when that happens. We are in a self-created downward spiral.

I find that people who willingly forgive others are often willing to recognize their own sins and effectively accept forgiveness. And those who do not forgive are also not willing to accept their own sinfulness.

John, our church's namesake, would have us been in a full and healthy relationship with God our creator and savior - who comes to us in a form we can understand, and who forgives us

endlessly. But the relationship can only form when we accept our limitedness. Here's a strange Christmas gift for ourselves. Stop trying to be perfect and do it all right on our own. Instead, give up. Accept our imperfections, accept the imperfections of others, and in so doing discover true fellowship with each other and our God. Amen