

“Born to Raise Us from the Earth”

A Sermon Series for Saint Mark's, Evanston by
The Rev'd John A. Dally

Sunday, December 30

“Born for Aye”

My name is John Dally and I teach preaching at Seabury. I've been asked to be the interim for your community as you await your real interim, so I am truly temporary indeed! These weeks are even more of a waiting period than the months of preparing a parish profile and beginning a rector search, and I suspect that as a community you have a lot of questions about identity and purpose and vocation. Such questions are both the opportunity and the challenge of interim times in a parish's life. I don't presume to have answers for you, but I hope that I can think through some of these issues with you over the next three weeks.

We begin today with the question of identity. We are in the midst of our celebration of the Christmas festival, our yearly celebration of birth of Jesus, a commemoration we undertake as though we know who Jesus is. Yet just who Jesus is has been a subject of disagreement from the time he walked the earth until today. One of the ways we establish identity is by knowing where someone came from. The Gospel of Mark has no idea where Jesus came from; the Gospel of Matthew has a clear idea, but it's completely different from the Gospel of Luke's account, the one that dominates our Christmas liturgies. And today the Gospel of John has weighed in, stating with the fullest confidence of any of the four where Jesus came from and who he is. But it's unlikely that any of the four gospel writers would recognize the lovely creche you've erected at the front of your church, with its Sicilian bagpipers and ruined Gothic arches. Because the Italians of the Baroque era were so commercially successful at creating and marketing such displays, today we find them not only beautiful but spiritually true: we know the birth of Jesus when we see it...it should look like this!

The fact it, the feast we celebrate as an historic event is in a pastiche of doctrine, gospel story, and the accumulation of culture and tradition. Peeling the layers away is like taking a rose apart: only a mystery is left at the center. Who is Jesus? Where did he come from?

When I was in college I sang in a parish choir where I was introduced to a Christmas anthem by the English composer John Rutter, called simply “A Nativity Carol.” Its refrain goes like this:

Far away silent he lay, born today, your homage pay.
For Christ is born for aye; born on Christmas Day.

The anthem is immensely popular and widely recorded and performed, but what does the refrain actually mean? How can you be born for “aye,” — “forever” — and born on Christmas Day as well? The prologue to John's gospel that we heard proclaimed this morning tries to express just such a paradox.

The Greek language has many more ways to express time than English. Most of the prologue to John's gospel is written in the imperfect tense, indicating a past action which continues into the present; we would express that idea by using the progressive: “The Word was being in the beginning, and the Word was being with God, and the Word was being God.” Not very poetic, and I'm sure you see why the English translators opted for something more simple.

But their choice means that when the Greek tense changes to aorist, expressing a definitive action in the past, we don't really take note of it: "And the Word *became* flesh and lived among us..." So in the Greek of John's prologue there is both eternity (born for aye) and history (born on Christmas Day).

Although the church didn't fix a date for Christmas until the 4th Century, there was never a lot of argument about observing Jesus' birth in history. It was his eternal birth that proved a big problem, and about the same time as the date of Christmas was set. By that same 4th Century Christians had begun to divide over something as small as an *iota*, the Greek letter "i." Was Jesus *homo-ousian*, of the exact same substance of God the Father, or *homoi-ousian*, of "like" substance to God the Father? Today we'd probably say, "Who cares?" but in the 4th and 5th Centuries Christians were willing to kill each other over that *iota*. (It makes you wonder what topics we argue about today that will seem inconsequential to our descendants.) What came to be known as orthodox Christianity insisted that Jesus was *homoousian*, of one substance with the Father, while the Christians who came to be known as Arians said that Jesus was *homoiousian*, the first of God's creatures but a creature nonetheless. And that distinction made it permissible to kill the Christians who were on the other side.

Yet at the heart of all these Christological debates was a mysterious paradox in the prologue to John's gospel. This morning we heard: "No one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18, NRSV). What the Greek actually says is, "It is the only begotten God, who is in the womb of the Father, who has made him known." *En tō kolpō tou patrou...* The Greek word *kolpos* is a common word, and it means "womb." Yet translators of John's gospel have always recoiled from rendering it the word in the plain sense of John's Greek: in the womb of the Father. The NRSV translation we heard this morning is actually not a bad substitute: "who is close to the Father's heart..." After all, that's exactly where a baby is carried, next to its mother's beating heart. And John's gospel says that that's where Jesus came from: next to God's beating heart.

John's gospel is equally clear that that's where we come from, too, though we may have forgotten. We think we come from Evanston, or Los Angeles, or New York, and our parents were Greg and Melinda, or Craig and Marilee. The Jesus of John's gospel has come into the world to remind us of our true identity, our true origins: we have come from next to God's heart, and one day we will return there.

In a portion of the prologue omitted from today's reading the disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus and ask, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" or, more accurately, "Rabbi, where do you live?" Jesus replies: "Come and see." (John 1:38). It's an invitation to those men and to all of us, as well: "Come and see." This is where Jesus wanted to take us, what Jesus wanted us to know: We can live next to God's beating heart. In spite of all the arguments of the theologians about Jesus' unique status, the prologue to John's gospel states that "to all who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God" (1:12).

I propose that vocation begins here, with identity. People who know where they've come from and where they're going are free to give themselves wholly to other projects. They don't need work to create identity, but can express their identity through their work. And what is true for individuals is true for communities as well: your identity comes from believing you abide next to the Father's heart, not from any external condition. If St. Mark's parish can believe it abides next to God's beating heart, it will know what it needs to do, as well.

"Christ is born for aye": eternally born, eternally beginning, eternally dwelling next to the Father's heart, asking us to come and see: It's a kind of Christmas open house invitation.

