

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## THAT THE WORLD MIGHT KNOW

Christmas Day

John 1:1-14

How does your favorite story begin?

A brief survey of our family and the church staff resulted in the following:

- It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. (*A Tale of Two Cities*)
- In a big city high rise on the very top floor lived a pink fluffy poodle- Poodlena Pompadour (*Poodlena Pompadour*)
- Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun. (*A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*)
- They said I was a lost cause. Not even worth praying for. (*Hard Fighting Soldier*)
- When the lights went off the accompanist kissed her. (*Bel Canto*)
- My day so far: went to jail, lost the girl of my dreams and got my butt kicked pretty good. (*Megamind*)
- The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed. (*The Dark Tower*)
- In a little side street off the Viale Glorioso, in Rome's Trastevere, there is a bar known to those who frequent it simply as Gennaro's. (*The Food of Love*)
- It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. (*Pride and Prejudice*)

We remember first lines of stories because they begin the stories that have informed our lives and to which we return as we do to the traditions of Christmases past. Simply put, our lives would not be the same without these stories. We come to know something about the world and about ourselves through the vicarious living into a story.

In my life, another first line ranks very high among the most memorable and that is the opening sentence of John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Since the creation of humankind, God has revealed himself to us by speaking to us. He has spoken a story into our ears – his story – and he has drawn us into that story by allowing us to see him in his Nature and to participate in his will. The opening sentences from the Letter to the Hebrews tell us:

<sup>1</sup>Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. <sup>3</sup>He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup>having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (Hebrews 1:1-4).

A prophet is a human being in whose mouth God places God's words. So it was not a huge jump in the divine strategy for the Eternal Word of God to come to earth as a human being. The Word that was spoken at creation is the Word that became incarnate, as well as the Word that will sum up the whole story of creation when he returns.

In John's Gospel we read further that, <sup>14</sup>...*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14).

God's story was written in the flesh and blood of human beings so that human beings might understand the message. A God who reveals himself only through his creation – the trees, the mountains, the stars, the waters and the harvests – is bound to be so closely identified with his creatures that men will worship the creation instead of the Creator (Romans 1:19-23). So the Word that was with God from the beginning and is God became the story of God among the people of the world.

This embodied Word was the Light because the Truth about God was written in flesh and blood so that human beings might be enlightened as to the Truth. If there ever was a life that was truly an open book it was that of the baby in the manger. The first line written in the stable in Bethlehem was continued to its climax at the cross and empty grave of Jerusalem and will have its conclusion with the establishment of the New Jerusalem. The whole story is not our story, but the story of God. We human beings are not the actors – we are the audience. God is the author, the producer, the director and the actor with all of creation as his stage.

The Word became flesh so that the world might know the One who spoke the Word. The story of Jesus is one that we can read in this life and come to know God's nature and God's will. But it is also the story that is the vehicle of our coming into a relationship with God for all eternity.

Stories become our favorites because they make a difference in how we think and act. While the text book might give us facts we might otherwise not know, a story gives us a life we would otherwise not experience. Text books dissect while story books connect. A story weaves a tapestry in which the threads of the reader's life become entangled with those of the narrative. We fight the orcs along side elves and hobbits. We tell Elizabeth that her prejudice is causing her to misjudge Mr. Darcey as prideful. We cry out to Samson to flee Delilah. No matter how many times we read the story, there we are – our lives mingled in those words.

So when God wanted to make himself known to humankind, he narrated a story. He spoke about himself and he spoke us into his story. Like any good story God's story is to be shared. It is a story for all people and is to be told throughout the world. As Jesus was the Word who wrote God's story in flesh and blood, the Church is Christ's body and is to go and do likewise. As those whose lives are mingled with God's in God's story we are to invite others to come into the story. Therefore, in celebration of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, let us be the messengers who announce peace, who bring good news, who announce salvation, who say, "God reigns...Let us break forth together in singing, for the Lord has comforted his people...The Lord

has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:7, 9-10).

Let us pray.

Father, thank you for the gift to us of your story. Thank you for the prophets that you have sent among us to prepare our spiritual eyes to be able to see your Word and read your message. But most of all, Lord God, thank you for sending us your Son and graphically writing your story on the parchment of your creation in his blood. Thank you for mingling our lives in yours through the Incarnation and for the transforming power that your story has on our lives. Each day may we be received more and more fully into your story through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, on December 25, 2011, Christmas Day.*