December 28, 2014 First Sunday after Christmas

All Saints’ Church Year B

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Psalm 147 Gospel of John 1:1-18

Let us pray: Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God; how pleasant it is to honor God with praise!

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is “What Child is This?” I love the words and the haunting, yet uplifting music. Also, I connect the question of the hymn with Jesus’ questions to Peter, “Who do men say that I am?” And then Jesus asks Peter directly, “Who do you say that I am?”

“You are the Christ,” answers Peter. I like the connection in the hymn with- birth, identity, and response. Peter had his answer. How do we answer, “What Child is This?”

In the 19th century, William Chatterton Dix, who had been an insurance agent, and not very religious, wrote this hymn after a debilitating illness which almost killed him. He recovered, but not without experiencing a great depression. He began to read the Bible and he believed that Jesus’ saving words of hope and redemption literally saved him, not only from death, but from his deep despair, as well.

Can you please open up your hymnals and sing the second verse with me, (Hymn 115): “Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christian, fear: for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.”

And this is another reason I like the hymn. Mr. Dix has combined the images of the babe Jesus, the manger, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, even the three kings, with John’s great opening image of his gospel, “The Word.” And the Word is pleading on our behalf.

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Jesus is pleading on our behalf, from ***before*** the beginning of time, to now, to always, for eternity. Jesus is in our camp.

Mr. Dix recognized in his own epiphany, that The Word was as close to him as his jugular vein- Truth, coupled with grace; Light coupled with power. The Word became flesh, and Mr. Dix’s flesh became more real. …just as our flesh becomes more real. Life as a Christian was not just about ethics or the afterlife, but rather matters of flesh and blood, eating and drinking and living, really living. Life matters. Eucharist matters. The bread and wine becomes life itself.

And out of this gift of the Word pleading on our behalf, we experience the freedom of being saved. And in thanksgiving, with grateful hearts, we put on, like clothes, the garments of compassion, tenderness, gentleness, patience and the spirit of forgiveness.

“The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.” We are being claimed as God’s very own. Our new clothes are not worn out of fear or obligation but with delight and hope. We are making a liberating choice to say, Yes, to this Light, to this Word. This is freedom.

In other words, we have received faith, not by works or justification or even rightly living, but rather by the gift of Jesus dwelling within all of us. We are the Body of Christ. No longer living under a custodian of right and wrong, the LAW has been transformed into a Freedom with Jesus. Through our baptism, we have put on Christ, no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, we are free to act and to trust that we are heirs, capable of showing forth God’s glory. Wow!

If we really trust in this, then I think we can reread the story of Adam and Eve. Rather than see The Garden of Eden just as our story of “the Fall,” we can see it as our story of the birth of faith. Adam and Eve were told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but then they did, and their eyes were opened. True, they saw their broken state, and they were afraid. But they also, with that one bite, were given the ability to see and recognize the Good, to see and recognize the Glory. Without the knowledge of Good and Evil, can you really choose for God? The Garden of Eden without the knowledge of good and evil, might be paradise, might even be perfect, but would you be aware of it? Without the knowledge of good and evil, you are living with ignorant bliss, but you are not living in faith. It would not be life, not even close.

With the knowledge of good and evil, we have been liberated with the capacity ***to really choose***. To say Yes. And we are no longer alone. The Word, Wisdom itself, dwells in our midst, always pleading on our behalf. Mr. Dix was pulled out of the grave of his despair by the living, loving hand of Jesus, and Mr. Dix trusted in his own ability, with Jesus at his side, to show forth God’s glory, no matter his limits, no matter his health, no matter his fear. We, too, by our birthright, by our ancestors, by Adam and Eve, and by our promise, can show forth the glory of God.

As the hymn ends, “Let loving hearts enthrone him.”

Who?

This child, this savior, who has been born to us, who is Christ the Lord.