

Happy Birthday

One of the big political talking points these days is the so-called War on Christmas.

Mr. Trump can be heard loudly proclaiming that it's finally possible to say "Merry Christmas" now that he is in power.

Never mind that there is not and never has been a war on Christmas, never mind that all of our past presidents make the greeting of "Merry Christmas" a part of every holiday season, it's simply another aspect of our increasingly fractured community that is crying out for healing, for unity, for understanding.

One of the posters made popular in this on-going kerfuffle is the one showing a picture of Santa Cause on one side, opposite a portrait of the holy family during the night of the Nativity.

And at the bottom is this question:

"Whose birthday is it, anyway?"

And the obvious answer is, of course, it's Jesus' birthday.

And last night, that fact was driven home quite nicely with the beautiful infancy narrative that Luke gives us, with his shepherds in the field and angelic choirs and of course, the babe in the manger.

Last night, there was no doubt whose birthday we celebrate.

But this morning, this first of the twelve days of Christmas, the question again peeks out at us:

"Whose birthday is it today?"

Now, this morning's gospel wasn't from Luke, it was from John, and John's gospel gives us nothing of a pregnant teenager or a lonely birth in a barn.

John says nothing of angels or shepherds or swaddling clothes.

Instead, John begins at the beginning; with the Word who was in the beginning with God, who is God; this Word who "comes to live among us," or, in the literal Greek, who "pitches his tent among us."

Now Luke tells us that God chooses to pitch his tent among the outsiders, among the weak, among those the powerful scorn and the rich simply ignore.

Luke highlights the scandalous nature of God becoming human in Jesus: born to an unwed teenager in a culture where such things often brought the death sentence, born not in Trump tower but in the feeding trough of a peasant's barn, welcomed not by the mayor of the city or the head of the Rotary Club, but by the ancient version of the Hell's Angels, also known as shepherds.

God arrives among the lost, the least, the outsider.

"There, on the fringe of society, the Word becomes history, contingency, solidarity, and weakness." Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez

"That he pitches his tent among us suggests not only a desire for intimacy but a special affection for the displaced, the dispossessed, people like migrants and refugees and deportees and detainees; yes, "aliens" of all kinds — all men, women, and children, past, present, and future, who walk the weary footsteps of those driven into forced exile.

And if we read the nativity narratives without the scandal of our current immigration crisis in mind — we are missing something crucial, something that is central to who God is, and the people for whom God cares." David Lose, paraphrased.

That the Word pitches his tent among us also says a lot about who and what God is not.

God is not the distant bearded fellow who started the whole ball rolling, and then leaves us to our own devices, as so much of America's civil religion would have us believe.

God is not some kind of angry old man who allows horrors such as the mass shooting in Las Vegas, or in that poor church in Texas, nor is he a God who allows, or even encourages, travesty to occur because, as some so-called Christian leaders claim: "we have abandoned God."

From our earliest traditions which find God clothing Adam and Eve when they choose to walk away from God, through the struggles of the Jewish people, and God's struggles with them to learn the ways of kindness, gentleness and compassion; right until today, when God surrenders all to become one of us, the constant truth about God is that God longs to be with us.

It is because of that longing that we can join with St. Paul and proclaim from the rooftops, that no matter the troubles or successes or failures of this life, no matter our doubts, or our fears, we are promised:

"that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, is able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom 8:38-39.

Which, in a funny kind of way, gets us back to that Fox News poster with the holy family on one side and Santa Claus on the other, with the question underneath asking:

"Whose birthday is it today?"

Perhaps the answer will surprise you.

It's the answer St John, the writer of today's gospel, gives us.

"He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

He came to those who were his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who receive him, he gives power; power to become children of God, who are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:10-13).

"To all who receive him, he gives power to become **children of God.**"

So whose birthday is it, my friends?

It is ours.

Because of the birth we celebrate this day, we too are born again, and what was once nothing more than flesh and blood, is now, through the grace and mercy of God, something holy, something sacred, something that is even eternal.

So Merry Christmas to all of you and to each of you, happy birthday!

+amen