

Feast of St. John the Evangelist

I John 1ff

John 21: 19ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

There is no doubt that sight and the ability to perceive clearly what we see are among the gifts of life that we hold most dear. Consider all the devices and techniques humans have developed to correct and keep sharp the vision we have. There are eye exams, single level glasses, bi and tri-focals, progressive lenses, contacts, Lasix and cataract procedures, along with a plethora of over-the-counter dietary supplements meant to give us the magic number known as 20/20. Dogs and cats have 20/100 which means that what they can see clearly from 20 feet away, a human can see equally well 100 feet away. This isn't bad. But as good as that is, imagine what it would be like to have 20/4 acuity. You could see an ant crawling from 10 stories up, a rabbit's movement from over a mile away, the expressions on a ball player's face from the worst seats in a stadium, and high definition TV would be dull compared to your color perception and ability to distinguish minute shade. There is a creature with all those abilities and a 340 degree field of vision as well; it is the **eagle**. It can detect and see things missed by nearly every other sentient being.

Today is the Feast Day of our patron, Saint John the Evangelist and Apostle. From very early times he has been portrayed in artwork, in illuminated gospels like the Book of Kells, and even on lecterns as—**AN EAGLE**. Why might that be the case? Such symbols are more than mere decoration. They point us, the viewer, to an ongoing and living quality. The eagle soars and is a picture of the resurrection, which is the very heart of the Christian faith, and from which everything else is viewed, and it sees what others miss, and calls out to them to see it, too. It is a fitting image for John whose writings, like his life, lead and give to us the possibility of deeper connections with God and one another.

There is no question that the Gospel of John was the favorite of the early English Church, and of the East, where he is called 'The Theologian'. His language lifts our eyes to places we can hardly imagine. He gives us the lofty re-writing of the first chapters of Genesis and creation, when he says, "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through Him." John gives us a complex and highly developed Bread of Life narrative in the 6th chapter of his Gospel. And anyone who has given even passing attention to the Nicene Creed when hearing the language, "very God of very God, begotten not made; of one being with the Father", cannot fail to see John's unique expressions of faith mirrored. He sees and speaks in ways that go far beyond simple story telling. **Yet**, all of his depth serves the deepest of purpose; he is answering the age old doubt and question, "How can the infinite God, who does not know human weakness and frailty, possibly understand my life, plight, hopes and dreams? The distance between heaven and earth is just too great." And John in the most poetic way available answers, "God has become one of us". Here we are gathered a mere two days after the Nativity, Christmas, the beginning of Jesus' life, and we are hearing about the resurrection and power of this person Jesus to change the world not as just a good moral teacher or an example of inclusivity, but as God's own presence. "That which we have seen and heard we declare unto you", so that all of us may have a relationship/actually live with God as our deepest and most intimate companion.

Do you remember your studies in grammar? As painful as it was, I do. Sometimes I think that the seasons of the church year are like parts of language; verbs, subjects, and especially prepositions. Prepositions make spatial and temporal links that give meaning to the things being linked. An example: One of the priests is from Tennessee. The preposition is the word, from.

Without it that sentence would make no sense—there would be no connection between the priest and Tennessee. The preposition for Advent is “toward”. God is moving toward us in history and his promises. For Easter the word ‘for’ seems to describe God’s activity on behalf of us. But for Christmas, the preposition would have to be ‘with’. In Jesus, God has taken a definitive and irreversible act of divine will to be ‘with’ us. John is using every expression available to proclaim and celebrate the Incarnation. The distance between us and the mystery we call God is bridged. John’s deep eagle-eyed insight is that God has entered into the weaving and tapestry of human existence, not as a thought, a philosophical thesis, or legal proposition, or even as a set of moral principles, but as a person. In this day and time when we tend to define reality by empirical, measurable categories, and the meaning of life on the basis of productivity and worth, or the degree of pleasure experienced, the Incarnation seems incredulous and far-fetched, almost beyond comprehension. A few days ago, our daughter, Beth, and I were looking at a report about the satellite and telescope called Gaia. You may have heard of it. It will provide the most accurate 3D map of the universe to date and show the position of billions of stars. One unique aspect of the telescope is that by looking at parallax, the apparent change in position a viewer sees of an astrological object, it can measure how quickly it is moving away. The latest findings suggest the universe is expanding at a faster rate than previously thought. My daughter said, “how can that be. If we know the distance to edge of universe, what is out there for it to move into?” “It just makes my head hurt to think about it.”

The Incarnation does something similar. It pushes the very limits of our ability to understand. As mysterious as it is it proclaims what no other substitutes have been able to do across history—It lifts our humanity up from darkness, brokenness, isolation, and gives it new dignity. It blesses us. That blessing is found in the fact that “the Word became flesh”, which means God has walked every step, every challenge, every joy and hope, and every loss and sorrow, step by step with and in us. It means we are loved enough for God to empty his power just to be with us. That is the fellowship John is talking about in the Epistle. And there are implications in that.

We could come here today and tell stories from the tradition about John and his brother, James; about how John was poisoned but survived and therefore is often represented with a chalice holding a serpent. (Take a look at the Chrismon tree ornament.) Or we could hear of his being tortured by the Emperor, Domitian, and coming away unscathed and therefore exiled to Patmos. But I suspect John would have none of that. He would call us to walk in the light of God’s walking with us. That means constantly seeing, realizing, living, and acting as redeemed people. The Incarnation is like a light that shines on our hearts and thoughts and all we do, revealing our sin and need for forgiveness, and calling us to be a community where the love God has for us is offered to all who enter here. And it means that fellowship is more than casual kindnesses to one another.

The Church is not a voluntary institution like a social club where mutual interests hold us together. It is not by social status, political party, or birthright that we gather. It is that we are a community held together by a common faith; faith that knows its source is outside itself. Perhaps it is beyond cognitive discovery or simplistic explanation. It is found in Him, who becoming one of us, loves us beyond the power of sin, darkness, failure and tragedy, fear and death. If Jesus is the Incarnation—The Word made Flesh—then our futures look entirely different than they would be otherwise. And with John we are called to walk in that light, bear witness to Him who is our hope and desire. Let our vision be that of St. John! Amen+.