

(I woke up early this morning to review my sermon. But first, I saw a piece that spoke to all the violence in our world today – and I wondered – how could I still be preaching about Christmas today...)

- None of our Christmas Gospels this year were from Matthew. That's because the Lectionary Christmas Gospels exclude Matthew, and are always the same in our Lectionary years A, B, and C.
- So today, I'm going to present my own "Christmas Gospel" from Matthew – for your consideration.
- Why? Because I want to remind you of the infinite *creative possibilities* of The Word of God. Here's how Episcopalians can define The Word of God:
 - It is *the* "creative verbal expression of God's power;
 - or *the* "Holy Scriptures that were written under God's inspiration;"
 - or "Jesus Christ, the Logos, the eternal Son of God, the Word made flesh."
- I would agree with most Episcopalians who believe that:
 - "the authors or editors of biblical material communicated their faith in their own words *after* being inspired by God.
 - The ultimate *expression* of God's word was not in law, prophecy, or scripture – but in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God."
- It is in this expression of Episcopal tradition that I give you my eminently "*unqualified*" selection from Matthew's Gospel as my own "Christmas Gospel" – The Incarnation of the Word.

Body

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. *But*, just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means: "God is with us."

- *You too can select your own Christmas Gospel...*
- This Christmas season we've journeyed through the 12 days of Christmas, stopped at Epiphany, and today is the Third Sunday in Epiphanytide.
- In today's Gospel, Jesus finds that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been arrested. This is not the first appearance of the Baptizer in Matthew. After the Christmas visit of the Magi and the slaughter of the innocents by Herod, John the Baptist appears directly after Matthew's Christmas story.
- *In fact, in all four of the Gospels John the Baptist appears right after, or even before, Jesus and the Christmas stories.*

- My favorite Christmas story is Luke's extended Infancy Narrative. "The Birth of John the Baptist" (is) Foretold" beginning in chapter 1, verse 5 – before Jesus is even mentioned. At the end of the Luke's narrative, we find the "devout and righteous" Simeon in the Temple literally waiting for the Messiah – when Jesus' parents bring Him into the Temple.

Simeon proclaims:

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel." (long pause)

- In John's Christmas story we meet John the Baptizer in chapter 1 verse 6, again before we meet Jesus.

"And 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."

- Mark's Christmas story – if you can even call it that – begins and ends in chapter 1, verse 1: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." John the Baptizer appears in verse 2.
- *In all four Gospels, Jesus is born with John the Baptist only a few verses away.*

- Finally, back in today's Gospel in Matthew, Jesus withdraws to Galilee – and from that time he began to proclaim: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Conclusion

- Today, we are following the Way – *of John the Baptist* – to Lent and Easter.
- We know “God is with us.”
- We know that both the Baptizer, and the “God-man” Jesus, have told us to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”
- We know that the “ultimate expression of God's Word” *is* “Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God.”
- *Alleluia, Alleluia*