

28 December 2008

B Christmas 1

Isaiah 61.10-62.3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3.23-25, 4.4-7; John 1.1-18 RCL

### Word and Babies

#### The Baptismal Sermon for Sophia Flores and Brooklyn White

Brooklyn and Sophia, you have chosen one of the best Sundays possible for your baptism. Within Christmastide, when we celebrate the best thing that ever happened to humankind – your people – the lessons from the Bible tell us wonderful things that you will grow to appreciate as you grow into your full stature as human beings. Let's take a little time to look at your baptismal lessons.

That reading from the New Testament book of *Galatians* tells us something that you will be intimately familiar with for a few years, the training effect of an outer discipline. Saint Paul calls it the Law. Law is something that is imposed from the outside because the person does not yet have the wisdom to understand the principles that govern life and law. So, often much against your will, your parents and their allies will teach you a language, teach you when to say thank you and please, how to get along with people, how to read and write and cipher, and lots more. None of this would you learn on your own, and some day you will find what you have learned will set you free from thinking about it and set you free from the consequences of *not* knowing it. The laws you learn to be human are annoying to learn but their purpose is to set you free from them, so that what they teach is second-nature and internalized, and you are finally free from the law, because now you know and act on the principles behind the law. So it is with spiritual and religious values; we are taught by a law that seems to chafe from the outside until we finally make what the law teaches second nature. Without even thinking that this is what we are doing, we learn to value trust, compassion, sacrifice, honesty, loyalty, love – all the things that make human life worthwhile and holy. You will eventually learn that is because these are the ways we imitate our loving and compassionate God and learn to be like God. Just don't forget to say please and thank you.

The psalms are songs that were sung in ancient Hebrew worship and spirituality; they are a wonderful inheritance for the Hebrew-blessed community that follows Jesus Christ as Lord. Psalm 147 moves on many different levels and we will leave you to your lifetime to plumb its depths. But we cannot refrain from pointing out the graciousness of God laid out in it – God's power, His wisdom, Her compassion. Toward the end of it, we learn that God has given His word to Her people. Words or patterns or models are the ways we symbol-making human beings make sense of the world to ourselves and communicate that sense to one another. Words are wonderful and powerful. The Psalm says that God

gives Her word to His people, and that means to you. You will not have to stumble around in God's good creation trying to find Her; He has given Himself to you and to us by communicating Herself in the ways that we human beings understand. Finally, psalm 147 tells us what our response should be: that is to acknowledge and worship and praise God for Her wisdom, power, and love. We praise God, not because God wants praise as some insecure men and women crave it, but because admiring and responsive praise is the only thing that makes sense for a creature who has nothing to give to a Creator who has everything. We don't sacrifice our children or our cattle or our grain to gain God's favor; we sacrifice our prideful tendency to take the center of the stage by acknowledging the One who truly deserves recognition. That is our proper response to God's goodness showered upon us. I hope you meditate on psalm 147 all your life.

We heard a passage from Isaiah (or eyes-eye-uh, as the English say). He is an ancient speaker-of-God's-word who spoke reassurance to God's people, a people that includes you and me. He tells of the wonder of God's people in the symbol of the ancient city Jerusalem restored to her glory as God's dwelling with humankind, after the misery of conquest and destruction. We are meant to see ourselves as the object of the prophet's proclamation. You will know hardship and discouragement in your life; we all do. But our God's message to us is that He has overcome all that would overcome us. Isaiah will tell us that.

But the best passage of all in today's readings (and, I think, in all of scripture) is the gospel reading. It is the evangelist John's creation story, consciously imitating *Genesis* one and two. It is one Christian's understanding of how God brought all into being and then became intimately committed and connected to that creation in a human life. John says that all the Wisdom and Power that made the universe with all its galaxies and stars and nanoparticles, a Wisdom and Power beyond conception by finite human minds, became an integral part of what She had created. This is how John said it: "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." (1.14) We have difficulty conceiving the infinity of God and our relationship to that infinity. But John says that we don't have to wrestle with the abstract concept of infinity. We have infinite wisdom, infinite power, infinite love, God Himself, expressed in a human life – born into vulnerability and powerlessness in a Bethlehem barn, murdered by selfish and short-sighted power on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem, resurrected by God's graciousness and love into a new life that promises a new love and a new world order to all of us.

That is why Christians get so excited during Christmastide. Even before the orgy of gift-giving that became common in the nineteenth century and continues into our own, Christians knelt in reverence before the vulnerability of infinite power in the Bethlehem

Baby. We recognized the amazing Gift of God Himself given to humankind, given to you, given to me. That Gift has changed the meaning of human life. We are no longer destined to go unquietly into the dark night of nothingness. We are destined to embrace the darkness in life and death as a waystation to the light and love that is God's eternal gift to Her children. As we love our children and give them our best – something you will learn as your life progresses – so God loves His children and gives them the best She can. The best is Himself with all that means, an unending life transformed by Divine Love into a life of beauty and joy and holiness (what the Church names glory).

So, Sophia and Brooklyn, this is your destiny as a member of the human race blessed by God in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made human flesh, so that we humans might become united in intimate life with God's Word forever. You are most fortunate of people, as we all are. Rejoice in God's graciousness, your good fortune, promised and guaranteed to us in the Bethlehem Baby made the Crucified and Resurrected Lord of Life in Jerusalem. Amen.