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SERMON OF DECEMBER 24-25, 2005

Christmas Day

John 1:1-14

Last week big news came out of a federal judge who hails from Schuylkill County. The *Pottsville Republican* carried the headline: “‘Intelligent design’ fails test.” As the related article states, “U.S. District Judge John E. Jones III, Pottsville, delivered a stinging attack on the Dover Area school board, saying its first-in-the-nation decision in October 2004 to insert intelligent design into the science curriculum violates the constitutional separation of church and state” (December 21, 2005, p. 1).

Intelligent design is a theory about creation—how the world came into being. Intelligent design claims that there are some aspects of creation that are so incredibly complex that they could not have happened by chance. Yes, genetic mutation may explain how differences come about among plants and animals—why pineapples today aren’t exactly like pineapples of 100 years ago—but the basic structure of life is so complex that it took something or someone very intelligent to get everything started.

That’s not science; that’s religion! ruled Judge Jones, who is a Republican (like most of you are) and a Lutheran (like even more of us are). So this was no left-wing, hippie, atheist judge from San Francisco. This is a churchgoer whose Pottsville pastors—including Lynette Chapman, my former intern’s wife—were invited to his swearing in as a judge roughly three years ago.

If Judge Jones is right, how does his ruling affect today’s Gospel lesson, John 1? After all, that lesson says about Jesus, “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Here the Bible says that Jesus was the intelligent designer; and here the judge says “no” to intelligent design.

That may seem to be a contradiction, but it isn’t necessarily a contradiction. Judge Jones’s pastor, Harold Hand of Trinity Lutheran, Pottsville, said in the newspaper, “Faith asks who did these things, who created us. Science tries to find out how.”

That is, the Bible’s statement is a statement of faith: namely, that behind the universe stands the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Science cannot prove or disprove that statement. Science can only deal with what can be seen, observed, tested. Science can come up with theories that describe how rocks, plants, and animals develop and change. But at least up until the present day science hasn’t been able to put God under a microscope, just as the Bible does not try to give a detailed explanation of exactly how Jesus brought all things “into being.”

In fact, when the author of John (our Scripture lesson) wrote this passage, he probably had no interest at all in wondering about how Jesus brought things into being. The author of John wanted to say something else. He wanted to tell us that Jesus, who lived and walked here on earth, was more than a simple peasant preacher. He was something remarkable, something eternal, something divine. Jesus wasn't like John the Baptist, who was only "a man sent from God," impressive though that may be. Jesus Christ was God. He was there at the beginning; he was great enough to be the creator of the universe.

That is an amazing point about Christmas: that today we celebrate the coming to us of God, coming not in splendor and glory but coming as a baby. The coming of God.

Last week for the first time in many weeks I wanted to drive my truck. My helper that day was Jeffrey Harman, and soon he and I discovered that moving the truck wouldn't be so easy. The battery was completely dead; we couldn't even jump-start the truck without first charging the battery for several hours. Then, when I finally tried to drive the truck, we got only about six feet before I was stuck in an ice rut in the alley behind my house. Now what? I was blocking the alley, but I couldn't go back and I couldn't go forwards.

So first I asked Jeffrey to push. No luck. I was still stuck. Then along came a car. "What will we do now?" I wondered; "that car can never get by me." Fortunately, the car didn't want to get by. It was my neighbor, coming home for lunch. She pulled off before she came to our blockage.

I called to her. Would you steer the truck so that I, too, can help push? Yes, she agreed—though modestly suggesting that she might be a better pusher than I. But I thought that it was in my place to join Jeffrey in pushing and pushing; and while we pushed, my neighbor spun the wheels faster and faster until we finally got out of the rut.

"Was that enough to get me into the Christmas Eve sermon?" Neighbor Nancy wondered when we were finished. Well, it wasn't enough for the Big Christmas Eve sermon, but it was enough for this Christmas Day one. The point being that there I was, stuck in a rut and getting nowhere, with no prospect of escape, when along came just the help we needed.

And there was the world, 2000 years ago: full of war, oppression even to the point of slavery, incredible hardship and poverty for most people, sin, death—and with a history of never having worked right. What chance did a person have of getting free? It would take a mighty good neighbor with a mighty big push.

And then the good neighbor came: God. No one less than God. And when God came "he gave power" to everyone who welcomed him. What kind of power? To drive through ice and snow? No. As our lesson says, "God gave us power to become children of God." How? By sitting safely in a cab and turning a wheel? No, by coming out with us into the hardships of life and even dying with us on a cross before rising again to glory. Through it all, "God gave us power to become children of God."

Think about it! As an early Christian you were no longer trapped in a harsh, cruel life that ended only in a grave. Now you could live as a child of God. You could know the Big Truth: that your existence mattered and was getting you somewhere. That realization—that reality—may not have immediately solved all of the problems of life’s injustice—they continue even today—but it added concern for others, deeds of charity, greater compassion, a sense of ongoing companionship with God, and the element of an eternal hope. There was now “light” shining in the darkness.

Last week I was only stuck on ice. During that same week a person I knew died from cancer. She was stuck, too. We knew that she had the disease and that there was no way out. Her doctors could push and pull all they wanted; it made no difference. Their medical science had its limits. It kept her comfortable; it could explain what was taking place; but in this case it couldn’t provide the push to safety.

But safety came, and at Arlene’s funeral we could celebrate that fact; we could recognize the light; we could celebrate the fact that her suffering has ended and that—through the power and love of Jesus—she continues her existence as a child of God.

On Christmas we celebrate not only the birth of one baby 2,000 years ago. We celebrate the coming of God so that we, too, could be born “children of God.” It’s not just Jesus’ birth; it is all of our births, too, into a life of freedom and hope with God.
Amen

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