

“Flavor of Giving”

John 1:1-14 (NRSV)

Christmas – Sunday, December 25, 2011

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I have a friend in seminary who is on the quest of the perfect blend of flavors.

Elise knows food and understands taste probably better than anyone I have ever met. Not only does she love to eat, she understands how to make food a full body experience. Her pallet is amazing. I’ve seen her go into a Mexican restaurant, taste one bite of the salsa on the table and then custom order a taco that will make you believe that your mind has imploded with deliciousness.

What makes her an even more reliable food critic is that her perfect blend of flavors doesn’t always have to come at a fancy restaurant or in a dish with some pretentious name that I can’t pronounce. She’s someone who can add Fritos into an average pot of chili, transforming it into a recipe that would leave the contestants on Chopped jealous. I trust her knowledge so much, in fact, that when my mother came up to Chicago to visit me a few weeks back, I only took her to restaurants that had the “Elise Scott” brand of approval.

Elise knows how flavors fit together. She also can recognize when even the smallest spice is missing.

Today is Christmas morning, and when we look at our passage from John, it may seem like there is something missing. When we think about the birth of our Savior, the birth of our Salvation, the birth of our Christian heritage – well, quite frankly we expect to hear something about a birth.

Lutherans follow a standardized pattern of sharing passages of the Bible in worship, something we refer to as the Revised Common Lectionary. Over centuries, groups of theologians and Biblical scholars organized sections of scripture, or lectionary, to ensure that on definitive days of the year we will read particular passages and share specific stories.

For example, today is Christmas and one suggested lectionary reading is the Nativity story of Jesus’ birth as seen in the middle of Bethlehem. This is the passage that speaks of Mary, Joseph, and angels. But in addition to that familiar story, the lectionary also urges us to read the Christmas narrative found in John, a version which doesn’t speak of a baby but instead speaks of a light in the midst of darkness. This morning, on this most holy of mornings, we have to ask ourselves, why read John’s message?

One of the perks of going to seminary is that you start to notice some patterns. For instance, the Bible is a big fan of duality. Take for instance the creation of the world told in Genesis – there are actually two stories. We have the most commonly recognized Adam and Eve tale, the story where man came first, then animals, then woman being formed from the rib of the man.

While Adam and Eve tend to get the most buzz, there is still another creation story. This version is drastically different from the story of the famous couple. Appearing first in Genesis’ layout, this

creation story tells us that the world was formed first, next came the animals, ending with the creation of man.

Similarly to the heritage of our creation, the onset of Jesus also has two stories.

For those of us who were here last night, we experienced the better known origin story from combined selections of Matthew and Luke. This collective version speaks of an angel appearing to Mary, a vision to Joseph, a family on the run to Bethlehem, and then a birth in a stable.

It is a beautiful, very human story that we as people who feel and live and breathe can relate to. When we read the Nativity version, we can visualize Mary and Joseph smiling down at baby Jesus. We can smell the hay and see the star blazing in the night sky. The story ignites all of our senses and aspects of God become anthropomorphic, meaning humanized. If we listen with our minds close enough, we can hear his divinity speak through the voice of Gabriel.

This anthropomorphic style is often referred to as the Jahwist tradition. This is the same tradition that wrote the Adam and Eve creation story. This style is all about relationships, about connecting the reality of our human experience to an abstract concept of God. The writers of the Nativity story understand that most people relate best to a good story, one where we can smell the hay and see the stars. Furthermore, writers in early Christian times wanted to connect the Jewish community to the roots of their heritage. Writing the nativity narrative in the style of the Adam and Eve creation story adds yet another layer on that bridge.

Recognizing that the Bible likes duality and that the writing style of Adam and Eve's creation story is paralleled to the Nativity origin story, we can further see the style of the other creation story is paralleled to the birth origin seen in John.

Unlike the Jahwist style that is all about the people, the John and first creation story is all about the royal authority of God. Assumed to be written by spiritual authority figures of the time, this Priestly style emphasizes aspects of God's nature that are not of this world. Instead of hoping to appeal to an audience who wants a tangible relationship to God, Priestly writers address an audience who want to know that God is in control and that because of his authority, will be protected. From a historical perspective, this audience would primarily be groups of people who are oppressed; people who crave that God will step in and intervene on their behalf.

Just as the Jawhists make literary connections between the Nativity and Adam and Eve, the gospel of John similarly pulls on threads of cultural history. I invite you to look at your bulletin and skim over today's gospel while I read a few lines Genesis 1. See if you can notice any similarities between Jesus' origin story and this first creation story:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Some people may look at the fact that there are different writers appealing to different audiences and think to themselves, “Wow, while our scripture contains the word of God, it also is about writers trying to market to target audiences.” We obviously have one group of writers speaking to an audience who wants to see, touch, taste and feel Jesus in order to figure out how to live their faith, and we unmistakably have a separate set of writers whose audience wants to live out their faith solely through following God’s authority.

If we were to compare Jesus’ PR found in the gospels to a modern context, which television network would get the better prime time viewership? Clearly both stations of the story are ultimately telling us the same thing – Jesus is a divine presence on earth – but which station would be accredited as the most accurate? Which would win the Emmy for journalistic integrity? Whose platform of communicating information is the one we should build our faith upon?

We celebrate the origin of Jesus’ presence on earth in two different ways because although we are one body in Christ, we are ultimately broken people.

There are some of us sitting here today that have felt the hand of God in a very tangible way within our lives. When we remember our baptism and taste Christ’s body and blood through communion, we can literally see that the Lord is good. This goodness helps to guide our choices, and is the gospel of truth helping us to live out our spiritual lives.

There are others of us sitting here today who need for God to step in, or have seen God’s authority directly play out in our lives. Those of us who relate to divine authority instead of relating to divine humanity are people who believe that our successes and failures are ultimately a result of God’s perfect plan. God’s ultimate authority is the gospel of truth which helps us live out our spiritual lives.

These two Christmas narratives show us that there are two ways that can experience a relationship with Christ. While we can argue back and forth about which way of experiencing Jesus is right, which is basically the entire reason why we have denominations to begin with, ultimately our scripture shows us that both ways of experiencing Christ is the right way. There is no right way or wrong way of knowing Jesus. It is just important that we know Jesus.

More importantly, we need recognize that the number one reason why some writers appeal to human interest while other writers speak to divine authority is because the essence of Jesus Christ is both. He is both fully human, and fully divine. He is both Jewish intimacy and Priestly authority. He is both cultural heritage and the future of our community. He was both born in a stable and the light in the night sky. He died and yet still lives.

He is the perfect blend of flavors, united together in one solitary dish to fulfill the hunger that comes from living in a world of sin and sorrow. He is the sustenance we need to take the edge off of our cravings of loneliness, greed, lust, gossip and angst.

Because he is both full human and divine, he understands how forces in our human experience tempt us just as he understands the freedom that comes from walking away from our temptations.

What a gift that we have a God who loves us so much that he would come to live a human existence in order to equip us with the skills to travel toward a divine future.

Our mission this morning is to do more than point out that Jesus is the perfect blend of human and divine. Our mission this morning is to do more than see the gift of Jesus' birth before us. Our mission is to open that gift, and allow its presence to transform our hearts and minds into a dish worthy of being described as the "perfect blend of flavors."

But how do we do that? How do we take the ingredients of love, forgiveness and grace and make it into a meal that will sustain us? Furthermore, what is the recipe that will nourish those who have never experienced the gospel in a transformative way within their lives, and better yet, fulfill those of us who haven't experienced that gospel within our own lives?

One of my favorite Christmas carols ever is "In the Bleak Midwinter." I used to sing this song over a decade ago when I was a student at Valley Forge High School as a part of our annual holiday concert. Every time I got to the third verse, I would get goosebumps on my arms. I have come to learn that when I get that type of goosebumps they are evidence that the gospel is working within my life. Similar goosebumps were present when I had the transformative realization to head to seminary.

Those goosebumps came from the following words: "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what I can, I give him – give, give my heart."

One of the biggest blessings of Christ coming in human form is that we are reminded that Christ remains within our humanity. That means every person sitting in this sanctuary today is holding a portion of the essence of Christ. When we ask ourselves, what can I give to become that completed dish God calls me to be today, we should remember that the first ingredient is recognizing that Christ lives inside of our neighbors.

When we pass the peace of Christ to each other in a few moments, we are also passing the peace to Christ. Allow yourself the ability to experience the goosebumps of God's nourishment by taking the time to notice Christ within those gathered here today.

As we pass the peace, let us not rush back to our seats so we can get home to our holiday dinner. Hold your neighbor's hand, and in doing so you will be holding Christ's hand. Look your neighbor in the eye, and in doing so you will be looking Christ in the eye.

The perfect blend of flavors is not out of reach – it is as near as the person sitting closest to us. The recipe of living our faith is merely at the end of our pews. All we have to do is embrace the opportunity to give, give our heart.

Amen.