



***A sermon preached by The Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, Bishop of Maine to the Episcopal Diocese of Maine for the service of the First Sunday after Christmas
December 27, 2020***

The first time I saw a Christmas tree out on the curb on Christmas afternoon was several years ago in Teaneck, New Jersey. I'd gone there following the Christmas Day service to be with family. I remember seeing it and thinking it was rather like a hangover with the tell-tale stories of the previous night's revelry.

Christmas celebrations are sort of like that, putting things up and taking them down, hauling out memories and then storing them away for yet another year. The church has a way of doing that too, and on this First Sunday after Christmas immediately after Christmas Day (in this case just two days) the Church puts away her birth stories and instead every year on this day she brings out another story about a beginning. About the event of the Incarnation.

So it is that every year we read the prologue of St. John's Gospel. It's a poem, really, and as beautiful as it is, there are things that are missing. Gone are the shepherds, the angels, the star, the lengthy details about governors and emperors and end-of-year tax forms. Gone too are all the players in the familiar Christmas story. Instead, St. John's Gospel account brings on light, life, glory, grace, truth, the Word. The Word made flesh.

Not exactly Christmas pageant material, yet really essential, really essential to our lives, maybe more this year than any other. The Incarnation understands the birth of Christ as the story of God becoming human. But the story would be pretty uninteresting if it didn't mean something that could change you and could change me. Most of the early Christian writers wanted to say this about the Incarnation: that God became human so humans could become like God. Not God, but like God.

In St. Paul's second letter to Peter, he says we are to become partakers of the divine nature. Which means we can let God be born in us, to incarnate us, and to grow in stature and character like Jesus in a life daily nurtured and given over to love, to forgiveness, and to a radical care for our neighbor whoever that may be. It's a selfless life and it's a faith that leaps quickly from the manger to the cross, at least for those of us who go beyond the manger. Basically, our faith isn't a commodity that can be packaged. Which is why sentimentality for Christmas prevails, and incarnation is pretty hard

to sell. But incarnation holds the promise that we can grow and we can change. And the church at its best is a community in which all can grow and all can change.

Christmas is a festival that lasts twelve days, not one. And while our Christmas trees will eventually be discarded and the decorations will be stored away, the incarnation is the gift of a lifetime - yours and mine. It's a promise actually, that says we are children of God. Merry Christmas.