

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 18, 2011 (4th Sunday of Advent)
John 1:1-4,14,16-18
“Gospel Introductions: Words of Joy”

Some brief remarks: For the past three weeks, we have been looking at the opening words to the gospels: Matthew’s genealogy grounding Jesus’ birth within the historical record of the Jewish people, Mark’s focus on how the prophet John the Baptist prepares us to welcome the coming Messiah, and Luke’s desire to compose an orderly account of the most important story ever communicated by men and women of faith. So today, on the fourth week of Advent, we will hear John’s familiar, opening words that point back to creation and point forward into eternity itself.

But with John’s prologue to the gospel, there is always the challenge of how to read them. Should I assume a professorial voice and read the opening lines as if starting a philosophy lecture: *In the beginning was the Word* (in Greek, Logos, meaning “word or speech”; in Aristotle it meant “reasoned discourse” and for the Stoics it came to mean a “divine animating principle, ground of all being”). *And the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through [Logos]*. Or should the passage be read in an overly dramatic preacher’s voice, stressing that our focus on the here and now is blinding us to our place in the eternal scheme of things: *In the beginning* (from the very dawn of creation), *was the Word* (God’s will, God’s law, God’s immutable desire that life be ordered so as to bring forth good fruit for the final harvest); *and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, ... and not one thing came into being without Him*. Do I read the opening of John’s gospel in an artistic way, trying to get you to see the creative canvas upon which these rich, vibrant words have been painted over the centuries? Or do I simply read them quietly, thoughtfully, like a meditation or a prayer, allowing them to sink into your own spirit and take form there?

Even as I ask these questions about John’s gospel, I am aware that other words are being spoken in today’s service, all of which come from a special man: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and teacher, who struggled to speak words of faith during the dark season of Nazism and Hitler’s rise to power. He was a martyr of our faith who died in a concentration camp because of prophetic words spoken and acts of resistance done. He is perhaps best known for emphasizing the difference between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” Bonhoeffer recognized that grace comes to us from a generous God, but that the activity of grace in our lives means that we are transformed by it. He wrote “it would be wrong for Christians to simply live like the rest of the world, modeling themselves on the world’s standards in every sphere of life, never aspiring to live a different life under grace from our old life under sin. That would be cheap grace sold in the marketplace; the sacraments, forgiveness of sin, and consolations of religion thrown away at cut-rate prices. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which we must knock. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field, for which we gladly go and sell all that we possess. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it may cost us our life, our security, our comfort, and it is grace because it gives us the only true life. It is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow Him; but it is grace nonetheless because Jesus says, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light."¹

Bonhoeffer lived in serious times and wanted us to take faith seriously. The short passage I read earlier spoke about how Jesus, the Son of God, was born for us – and how we are his and he is ours; our very life now depends on all these things and that this child has our life in his hand. If we desire to be the sole master of our own life, those words fill us with fear. But if we desire to let go, to surrender our attempts at self-determination and mastery, those words give us tremendous joy. "A child has our life in his hand." We are not alone. We are not at the mercy of our own fears, our own demons, our own struggling efforts to get things right even precisely when so much seems to be going wrong. For us a child has been born, a child placed at the center of history; everything past and everything future is encompassed here.

To understand that, even feebly, is to be set free. It is to choose life. It is to receive costly grace. And that, my friends, is the secret of joy.

So let Bonhoeffer's words of joy carry over to John's gospel, and hear these words anew today:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 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. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known.

Amen

Continue to the next page to read Bonhoeffer's "Those Who Go to the Manager"

Those Who Go to the Manger, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

If God choose Mary as his instrument,
If God himself wants to come into this world in the manger at Bethlehem,
that is no idyllic family affair,
but the beginning of a complete turnaround,
a reordering of everything on this earth.

If we wish to take part in this Advent and Christmas event,
then we cannot simply be bystanders or onlookers,
as if we were at the theater, enjoying all the cheerful images.
No, we ourselves are swept up into the action there,
into this conversion of all things.
We have to play our part too on this stage,
For the spectator is already an actor.
We cannot withdraw.

What part, then, do we play?
Pious shepherds, on bended knee?
Kings who come bearing gifts?

What sort of play is this,
where Mary becomes the mother of God?
Where God enters the world in the lowliness of the manger?

The judgment of the world and its redemption—
that is taking place here.
And the Christ child in the manger is himself the one
who pronounces the judgment and redemption of the world.

He repels the great and the powerful.
He puts down the mighty from their thrones.
He humbles the arrogant,
His arms overpowers all the proud and the strong,
He raises what is lowly and makes it great and splendid in his compassion.

Therefore we cannot approach his manger
as if it were the cradle of any other child.
Those who wish to come to his manger
find that something is happening within them.

¹ Cf. *Devotional Classics*, ed. Richard J. Foster & James B. Smith, from "The Cost of Discipleship" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer; pp. 292-293; and Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*.