**Ephesians 1:3-14**

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

**John 1:1-18**

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14And 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.

15(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) 16From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

Christmas Aint Ever Over

Today is the 12th day of Christmas, twelve days after Christmas. Christian tradition would still have us feasting and celebrating Christmas. Tomorrow is the Day of Epiphany, and the Church celebrates the arrival of the three magi coming to see Jesus (no, they were’nt three kings, and no, they were not present at Jesus’ birth as we often depict with our nativity scenes). But whatever the Church’s traditions may be, most of us have already moved on from Christmas. We’ve taken the decorations down. The extended families have gone home. The kids are back in school. We’ve eaten most, if not all, of the cookies and leftovers. Life is back to normal.

But today’s Gospel reading actually gives us one last breath of Christmas, though you might not recognize it. The Gospel of Mark offers us no Christmas story at all, so our lectionary tends to skip him. Matthew and Luke tell the stories we’re so familiar with – Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, mangers, magi, and the like. And now the Gospel of John, in rather poetic if not obscure fashion, tells us what the hoopla is all about. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God….the Word became flesh and dwelt among us…those who receive him are children of God…the Law came through Moses, but grace and truth come through Jesus Christ. Martin Luther really liked the Gospel of John: called it the chief Gospel to be preferred above any of the others. But to read it can be a real challenge. Years ago I used to tell people who were agnostic but interested in learning about Jesus to read the Gospel of John. Now I realize this might have been a mistake: I don’t recall many of them coming back to me or to my church and declaring, “Hallelujah! I’ve been saved!” Who knows what happened to them – perhaps they’re still puzzling over the Gospel of John. Perhaps they’ve given up. Telling someone who is really seeking to know Jesus Christ to read the Gospel of John can be like telling someone interested in flying to the moon a manual on how to build and operate a Saturn Five rocket; the information they need is there, but what are the chances that they are going to get to the moon?

I might still recommend the Gospel of John to some who seek to know Jesus Christ – it’s a magnificent Gospel. But I would say a few things before sending that person off to puzzle over John’s lofty, and somewhat mystical writing. First I would say to open your mind to the very radical claim that John is making. As much as we pay homage and tribute to Jesus during Christmas through our recounting of the stories in Matthew and in Luke, ***it is in the context of the claims made in John’s Gospel that we truly glorify Jesus at Christmas.*** Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that Jesus was significant – messiah, son of David, Son of God, but all of these descriptions could be understood to mean that Jesus was something less than God. They leave wiggle room – the prophet Isaiah refers to a Persian King as a messiah; son of David simply means from the lineage of a great king; even Son of God implies something less than God himself. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN IS THE ONLY GOSPEL THAT COMES OUT OF THE GATES MAKING THE RADICAL CLAIM THAT JESUS IS GOD HIMSELF IN THE FLESH. “IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD…” “AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH…”

FURTHERMORE, JOHN’S GOSPEL IS THE ONE THAT EQUATES JESUS WITH THE TRUTH. In the verses we just read, Jesus is described as being full of grace and truth. That while the law came through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus declares, “I AM THE TRUTH” That’s an unusual statement, right? And we easily miss the point of that statement. Usually we think of Jesus as “speaking” truth, or we study doctrine about Jesus and declare that the doctrine is truth. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus is himself TRUTH. A Christian doesn’t declare, “I believe in the teachings of Jesus.” A Christian doesn’t declare, “I believe in what the Church tells me about Jesus.” A Christian simply declares, “I believe in Jesus” HE HIMSELF IS TRUTH. NOT WHAT HE SAYS AND WHAT THE CHURCH SAYS ABOUT HIM MAY OR MAY NOT BE TRUTH, BUT IT IS NEVER THE TRUTH.

One of the phenomena of our time is a movement AWAY FROM organized religion as people become skeptical about what the church teaches. Steve Martin, the comedian in one of his comedy shticks, says, “I believe in 8 of the 10 commandments…in going to church every Sunday, unless there’s a game on.” What makes that funny is that it reflects the truth that we question the authority of the church and what it teaches, and we don’t feel obligated to attend. Early on in history the Church tried to persuade people that whatever the Church taught, about Jesus or anything else, was truth, but fewer and fewer people actually buy that. And perhaps the decline in interest in the Church is because the Church has attempted to convince folks that what Jesus spoke was truth, and what the Church teaches about Jesus is truth, BUT NOT MADE A STRONG ENOUGH CLAIM THAT JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF IS TRUTH.

Inside all of us is a yearning for truth. Children seek truth first from their parents…or their pastor (Last night Amanda Cipully asked, “How do you know everything?” – notice it wasn’t “Do you know everything?” but rather “*How* do you know everything?” She assumed that I did). What happens with every child is that they grow up and come to realize that their parents or pastors don’t know everything; they must find truth on their own. And people will spend years seeking truth. Some will give up and settle for the world as it is – they’re called cynics. But most, I believe continue their search. Why? Because it is true what Jesus says, “the truth will set you free.” Or to put it conversely, “Lies are what keep us in bondage.” Anytime we live our lives in ways that we suspect are based on lies, Even when the lies are spread by the church itself, We are not free, but in bondage, and for us to be truly free, we need to live “in truth,” which, according the Gospel of John, means *in Christ!*

Now I realize that I’ve opened several cans of worms and it would take months or years to elaborate. But I want you to leave today reflecting on the awesome notion that God, the truth itself, became flesh and dwelt among us. Just as we are all searching for the truth, we find that the truth itself, the Word of God, has come searching for us, which indicates that the core nature of truth, the core nature of God, is *LOVE.*Love searches for the lost. And so Christmas need never be over, as long as God continues to search for us. May we cherish this wonderful truth, which is not a doctrine or an ethic, but is Christ himself.