

## A Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the First Sunday after Christmas, 27 December 2009, based upon John 1:1-18.*

The first time I saw a Christmas tree out on the curb on Christmas afternoon was in 2005, in Teaneck, New Jersey. I'd gone there, following the Christmas Day liturgy in Brattleboro, to be with family. I remember seeing it and thinking it was rather like a hangover with the telltale stories of the previous night's revelry.

Christmas celebrations are 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.

Immediately after Christmas Day, only two days later this year, the church puts away her birth stories, and instead, every year on the First Sunday after Christmas, she brings out another story about a beginning, about the event of the Incarnation, and every year we read the Prologue of John's Gospel. It's a poem, really, and as beautiful as it is, there are things missing. For one thing, the crowds and the packed pews are gone. Gone also are the shepherds, the angels, the star, the lengthy details about governors and emperors, and end-of-year tax forms. Gone are all the players in the familiar Christmas story. Instead, John's gospel account brings on light . . . life . . . glory . . . grace . . . truth . . . the Word—the Word made flesh. Not exactly Christmas pageant material.

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 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 Paul's second letter to Peter, he says that we're 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, forgiveness, and a radical care for our neighbor, whoever that might 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 hard to sell. But incarnation holds the promise that we can grow and change. And the church at its best is a community in which all can grow and all can change.

It's a festival that lasts 12 days, not one and while trees can be discarded and decorations can be stored away, the incarnation is a lifetime gift, a promise actually, that says we're children of God.