

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
25 December 2011**

Christmas Day: Isa 52:7-10; Ps 98;

Heb 1:1-4; Jn 1:1-14

Thomas Eoyang

What we hear in the Christmas morning gospel reading sounds totally different from what we hear on Christmas Eve. Instead of hearing about “those days” of the Emperor Augustus, we hear “In the beginning.” Instead of a specific historical time we hear about cosmic time.

“In the beginning”—these words are meant to recall the opening words of Genesis, “In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth.” In the opening verses of Genesis, God speaks the universe into being. God uses words to create the universe: “Let there be light” and there was light. So, too, in John’s gospel—in the beginning was the Word. As the passage unfolds, that Word, we begin to understand, is a conscious being of some kind; perhaps a human person but somehow more than a person. That Word, that act of speech, like the word spoken in Genesis, gives life and light. That Word creates and generates and animates. That being, that Word, was there at the creation of life itself, and that Word, that life, comes again to be the light of all people. Whoever wrote the letter to the Hebrews echoes this sense of who God is and who God the Son is: “but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”

We learn something profound and mysterious in John’s gospel: the Word that comes into being is God’s self come to live a human life on earth, and human life will never be the same again. Everything changed once and for all, John seems to say, because God came into the world. The world changed because God’s relationship to us changed. This unnamed being, this “Word” would live a life on earth that changes forever both how people could imagine God. And it changes forever how people could imagine being human.

The logos, the Word, by which God set the universe in motion now sets the human race on a radically new path. There are new possibilities for human beings because the Word became flesh. In our imaginations, in the parts of our minds and hearts where words take root and grow, we can envision that things can be different than how they seem to us today. In the parts of our minds and hearts where words take root and grow, hope and desire and idealism are renewed. In the parts of our hearts and minds where words take root and grow, a reality is born in the spirit that points to things that we have not yet seen. The reality of Jesus Christ coming into the world opens up those visions, they kindle those hopes, and they fire that spirit in ways that no amount of rational thought, no amount of doubt, skepticism, or ridicule can ever diminish.

There are many in the world for whom everything I’ve just said is just a mound of gibberish. They have little use for anything but rational thought and only rational thought; they refuse to see anything that is not revealed by a coldly scientific view, by a focus on material reality alone. They think it absurd to believe that there is a God, much less that this God injected God’s self into human history through something called the

“Word made flesh.” One of the most eloquent and argumentative of these people just died a week or two ago, a man named Christopher Hitchens. Far be it from me to argue with a man as brilliant as Hitchens. He could have crushed me in a debate in less than five minutes.

I have to say, on behalf of those for whom rational material thinking is the only kind of thinking, that the coldly scientific view, the focus on material reality alone, has its merits. It has helped us combat disease. It has increased the life span for many of us. It has allowed us to fly through the air further than any bird, to travel on land faster than any animal, and to communicate in multiple ways with anyone anywhere else on the planet.

But for me the cold, morally neutral scientific view has very little to say about what it means to be uniquely human. I doubt it has very much to say about conscience. It has little say about why some people are distressed and others are uncaring when the wealthy enjoy abundance at the expense of those who struggle and starve. The morally neutral scientific view of the world has done little to solve the problem of how our ignorance and hatred lead us to war and genocide. The morally neutral scientific view has very little to say about why one person is moved to pick up a gun to slaughter his neighbor while another person travels to the other side of the globe to dig a well for someone she’s never met.

*Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

The morally neutral scientific view of the world offers us no comfort when social, biological, economic, or political forces bring us to our knees and make us howl with pain.

But because the Word became flesh and lived among us, the world changed forever. We have new abilities—new sight, new hearing, new understanding—to deal with the hatred and envy and greed and all the worst human instincts that hold us back from being what God intended us to be.

Because the Word became flesh and lived among us, because the Son of God came to live our broken life with us, we have the power to understand ourselves as children of God, sharing in God’s vision for a better world, a more merciful world, a more joyful world, a healthier and more beautiful world, a more just world.

Because the Word became flesh and lived among us, we are animated by a new spirit, a spirit of grace and truth. That spirit empowers us so that we, too, can speak life-giving words: words of kindness, words to offer care where there is neglect, words to give dignity where there is shame, words to engender love where there is oppression and abuse.

The Word of God become flesh in the world offers us God’s comfort amid the world’s pain and darkness, and we in turn can offer comfort to one another. The Word of God become flesh ignites our capacity for actions as well as words—acts of compassion, acts of justice, acts of reconciliation: bringing food to where there is hunger, healing to where there is sickness, peace to where there is war.

If we understand that the God who was with us from the beginning is with us always; if we are thankful to the God who takes an active interest in all that we do in the

material and spiritual world; if we are faithful to the God who calls us to make morally positive choices in the world, to leave behind the myth of the morally neutral scientific view—then, perhaps, we can learn to speak the life-giving word; then, perhaps, we can begin to heal, to live in a lasting and just peace with ourselves, with the world around us, and with God.

In the coming of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, we are given a new view of the world; we are given a new view of creation. Because the Word became flesh and lived among us, the world changed forever; the world itself became new. Our response to that Incarnate Word must likewise be new: *Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.*