SERMON – Dec 27 2020

*(3rd day of Christmas;* ***Feast of St John the Divine****)*

We’re still in the season of Christmas.

Today is the 3rd Day of Christmas – December the 27th.

It’s also known as the Feast day of St John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, who is said to be the youngest of Jesus’ chosen 12 disciples.

Feast days of saints aren’t always remembered in our Lutheran congregations. We’re not opposed to them and the tradition of giving honour to these faithful witnesses of Christ is a good practice for us. It’s not unlike us remembering our relatives who have died, and giving thanks to God for their witness and love and encouragement to us.

But it might seem strange to have a feast day for one of the Jesus disciples during the season of Christmas. Actually, there are several feast days, immediately following Christmas Day; and they are there for a reason.

* **Dec 26th** honours **St Stephen**, who was the very first Christian to died because of his faith in Jesus (you can read about this in the book of the Acts 7:51-60).
* **Dec 27th** remembers **St John**, also a faithful witness to Jesus.
* And **Dec 28th** is the Feast Day of **the Holy Innocence**, which remembers the tragic homicide of the infant boys born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod, who ordered this slaughter to prevent any newborn king from usurping his throne. (see Matthew’s 2:13-18)

These feast days immediately after Christmas remind us that Christmas is not just about stars and tinsel and feeling-good at least once a year, Christmas is the story of human rebellion and our need for a Saviour. Jesus was born into this world in order to redeem a defiant and broken people lost in darkness, and to lead us back to God.

The Feast days which honouring Stephen the first martyr, and the Holy Innocence makes some sobering sense as a reality check in the season of Christmas. But why remember St John? He doesn’t even tell us the Christmas story as we have it clearly recorded written in the gospel accounts of St Matthew and St Luke. Or does he?

In fact, it is from John’s Gospel that we have our Gospel reading every Christmas Day. John doesn’t tell the Christmas story as we tend to know it, with angels and shepherds and wisemen. John tells it from a universal and divine viewpoint. He transports us back in time; before creation. This is where he wants us to see Christmas starting. **‘1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God… 3 Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made… 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’**

That’s John’s Christmas story – The Word became flesh; God who is beyond time, entered into human time and took on human flesh living a human existence among us.

John’s not worried about elaborating on the way all this happened. He’s not concerned about angelic appearances, or census timelines that lead to rural Bethlehem, or visiting magi from oriental places; as extraordinary and intriguing as they are. John’s not concerned with ‘how’ things happened as much as he wants to tell us ‘why’ they happened.

**‘1:4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it… 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him… 3:19 This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.’**

This is John’s witness to the world.

He recorded it for us in his gospel account, and he wrote similar words in his first letter which we also have in our New Testaments. **‘1:1That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.’**

It was important for John, not simply to tell people wonderful stories about what Jesus did so they are would be recorded for perpetuity. But John carefully and deliberately authored his gospel account to instil in its hearers a sense of hope, that would ultimately lead the listener to faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

The words in his letter continue, **1:2The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ... 5This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.**

In the concluding chapters in his gospel account, John tells us, ‘**20:30Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.’**

The heart of John’s witness is to lead people to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and through this faith to assure them of God’s gift of eternal life that comes to us through Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection.

There is one other writing that is traditionally identified as coming from St John, and that is the book of Revelation.

Interestingly, it was about one month ago that I picked up a book in the Koorong Christian Bookstore, which caught my eye. Many of you know that I love nativity scenes and have quite a collection. This small book is titled, ‘The weirdest Nativity’. Intrigued by its title I decided that I needed to buy it and read it. Upon reading this book, it reminded me that in fact that the birth of Jesus is also recorded in the book of Revelation. But just like in John’s gospel, where you blink and miss the mention of Jesus’ birth (The Word became flesh and dwelt among us) you could also be excused for missing the mention of Jesus’ birth in the book of Revelation also, with all its symbolism and allusions. But there in Revelation chapter 12 verse 1 we read, **‘A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. 2She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. 3Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. 4Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. 5She gave birth to a son, a male child, who ‘will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.’ And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. 6The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of...’**

It's not quite the Christmas story as we generally hear it. Who knew that there was an enormous red dragon in the nativity story? And the woman mentioned is not to be understood as Mary, but rather as God’s chosen people, Israel; for Jesus enters this world through his birth into the family of Israel. In Revelation, John tells us about the birth of Jesus from his heavenly universal viewpoint. Jesus was born into this world and time in order to do combat with Satan, the enormous red dragon. In Revelation, John moves straight from Jesus’ birth to his resurrection and ascension – ***She gave birth to a son, a male child, who ‘will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.’ And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.’*** – testifying to the fact that Jesus’ human birth was for the purposes of rescuing us from Satan and opening up for us the way to eternal life with God.

And he has done this! Satan has been defeated, and we have life through faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

This is St John’s testimony to us. This is his faith and his witness, so that in hearing this, we might believe and have life eternal.

Like the encouragement of the Feast of St Stephen (Dec 26) and the Feast of the Holy Innocents (Dec 28) which remind us not to lose hope in the midst of the persecution of God’s faithful, so too the Feast of St John (Dec 27) reminds us to hold on to the hope and truth we have in Jesus - who was born into this world of darkness, to combat and defeat the evil and the deceptions that Satan will use to lead us away from God; and through Jesus to be drawn back to God in live in the joy of his gift of eternal life and light. Thanks be to God. Amen.