

I want to start with an overview of the Gospels and their accounts of Christ's birth; you might find a few surprises as to who wrote what.

Mark is the shortest Gospel, written first among the 4. Mark does not at all state anything about the birth of Jesus, but instead starts with John the Baptist and the meeting of John and Jesus. To Mark it is not important where Jesus comes from but that his start of his ministry began with John the Baptist and was characterized by a succession of mighty works, the sign of the presence of God's power, alive in the ministry of Jesus.

Matthew describes God's will as disclosed in the Old Testament, as Israel's Messiah. His audience was Jewish, and thus it is not surprising that Matthew begins his Gospel with the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. To Matthew, the birth of Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. Mary is a virgin, and an angel goes to Joseph to dissuade him from divorcing her, which would not cause as much shame as having a child out of wedlock. We also get Herod and the wise men and Herod's displeasure with the birth of Jesus. In this account, an angel advises Joseph to take the baby and Mary to Egypt to flee Herod and to remain there until Herod's death. Do you see the bent of this Gospel towards the Jewish prophecies? Fleeing to Egypt reminds us of the story of Moses who began his ministry there. That is the point in this Gospel, that Jesus is the new Messiah and is the new Moses.

Luke- this Gospel has as its audience all people, both Jew and Gentile. The message here is universal, Jesus was born to bring salvation to the world. It is in Luke that we have the most fleshed out Christmas story; we start with the elderly Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who are the parents of John the Baptist. The angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah to announce that he will have a son, and they will call him John. Then the same angel visits a virgin named Mary who is betrothed to a man called Joseph, and the angel tells her not to be afraid, for she has found favor with God, and will conceive and bear a son who she will call Jesus. Mary questions how this can be because she has no husband and Gabriel explains that it is through the Holy Spirit. Mary is also told about her kinswoman, Elizabeth, and she went to visit her. Here is where we get the Magnificat, the words of Mary about the promises of God, that we read together as Canticle 15 before the Gospel. Luke continues and references the census which required Joseph to travel with his wife to the city of Bethlehem, the city of David (the way to show Jesus was born into the house of the King). There was no room in the inn when Mary went into labor with the child, and Jesus was born among the animals and placed in swaddling clothes in a manger. The shepherds were told by an angel of the birth of Jesus and went to praise him. Jesus is then circumcised at the end of 8 days by the elderly Simeon who was told by an angel that he would see Jesus who would be as a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and to the glory of the people of Israel.

Lots of angels visit people and tell them the story about to unfold. Without the Gospel of Luke, our Christmas would not have the many songs we sing, the children's plays put on, or the way for the Gentiles to receive this baby too. This Gospel has more women among its references than the other two and is one of my favorites.

These three Gospels were written in the last third of the first century, or around the time 50-60 years after the death of Jesus. So, you see that these stories had been talked about for decades following the death of Jesus and they likely started to be told orally, and not written

down fully until the time that I mentioned. The authors are not even fully known but were thought to follow the teachings of Mark and Matthew, and physician Luke, who was a friend to Paul. This is how their Gospels were named.

Now we come to the Gospel of John, the beginning, also known as the Prologue, is always spoken on the first Sunday after Christmas. It is remarkably different than the other 3 Gospels, and that is why I spent a few minutes walking through them. Mark, Matthew and Luke are referred to as synoptic gospels because they are similar in their stories, often in similar sequence (Christmas notwithstanding), and sometimes use the same or similar language. It is thought that the synoptic gospels used each other and elaborated more details (remember Mark first which was the shortest, followed by Matthew and then Luke which was the most descriptive).

This Gospel is ascribed to the apostle, John, who witnessed the events of Jesus' ministry. In verse 19 the Gospel says, "This is the testimony of John." He is referred to as the apostle "whom Jesus loved" and called out to by Jesus when he was dying on the cross, to take care of his mother Mary. The apostle John traveled to Ephesus in what is today Turkey and is called the Evangelist for his ceaseless witness to what he saw and believed in the name of Jesus. Today, scholars believe that the Gospel of John is a compilation of his words, plus more, all under the Johannine community of Christians.

John was written last of the 4 and is not considered a synoptic gospel. Its prologue (versus 1-18) begins almost as if it is poetry. There are some scholars who propose that these first words to open the Gospel that we just heard, "in the beginning was the Word (Word capitalized as it is the same as God), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", might have been sung as a chant or a song before it was written down.

There is some debate as to when the Gospel of John was written. When I was in seminary it was thought that John was written after the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in the year 70 AD. This was thought to explain why John's gospel takes a far wider view of the ministry of Jesus, because Israel was now without a Temple which clearly identified the difference between the Jewish and this new religion in Jesus. God was far greater and lived in the world, not a Temple. Now, there is less talk of this which to me is more remarkable. We have 3 gospels that bring us an historical Jesus, and then a fourth that brings us a faith in Jesus.

IF we consider the first 3 Gospels as historic stories, then John must be considered as a spiritual account to them, a behind the scenes look at Jesus ministry on earth to let us see both the divine and human in this one Man who was more than a man. I am referencing here the Oxford annotated Bible in its Prologue of John: The Word is more than speech it is God in action, creating, revealing and redeeming. Jesus IS this Word. He IS eternal (in the beginning), IS personal (with God), IS divine (was God). Note the use of the word is rather than the word became. John is making his case that Jesus is both God and human, which is the mystery of the person of Jesus.

John's Gospel makes one think, which is exactly its purpose. As do the other Evangelists, John records real events but the difference is that he goes beyond them in interpreting them. He uses symbols from common experience – such as bread, water, light, life, door—and adds contrasting images from the world at the time, and I believe relevant to our current time and thinking -light/darkness, truth/lies, love/hatred—to make the meaning of Christ clear and gripping.

Darkness is total evil in conflict with God, but it cannot overcome God. John the Baptist was sent or commissioned by God to point to Jesus. True light is real light contrasted not with false light but with light such as John, who was but a lamp. Today we might contrast cosmic light, the light that is throughout the universe and which emanates from God, with the artificial light- the lamp- used by the rest of us, the people. Do we people have cosmic light? Yes, for John's Gospel states, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." This is profound thinking. Let me say it another way: as we come into belief with Jesus, he embraces us and shares his light, his life with us. We then share this light and life with one another. We use it to light up the world.

Then come the words to which I take a great deal of comfort, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." When we are in the wilderness, using the words of our Gospel writers, when we are in grief, loss, sorrow, hurt, we need to find the light to show us the way out. We use our modern words, the light at the end of the tunnel. These times are when I pray, the darkness cannot overcome the light. This I believe and even in the context of dark matter, which we hear is so prevalent in our universe, I still say that the darkness captures the light, but it cannot be extinguished.

I ask you to hold on to these words. In 2025, we will be facing a new President, and I suppose, a new way of governing in this country. There are people who are afraid, while others are excited. And that is the way it usually goes every four years. But there is a great chasm between these two types of persons, and, as Christians, I am asking you to give some thought to the side that is opposite of yours. If you are excited, try to imagine the fear that some people have, people like the undocumented, women who want to say what can be done to their bodies, and put yourself in their place. And if you are one of those that fear what will happen, I ask you to try and imagine the anticipation that some people have, people like those without jobs, or those who do not own their home, or those competing with the rest of the world to try and get ahead in this country. Open your heart and use the grace of compassion that was given to each of us.

Because, we all have the light of life, through God, every one of us. Each of us who believes in Jesus, and even those who are skeptical, or agnostic, or other faiths, all share the light from God. Some of us call this light love and those of us at St Columba's know, from the many sermons preached by Rev. Susan, that love for one another is the most important act we can do in this life. Love the stranger. Love your enemy. Love someone who hurts you. Love yourself. Love the Earth. They are all very tall orders, and we hesitate because it is not easy for human beings to do this. Jesus showed us how to love everyone. And when you feel there is darkness, and you don't know what will happen next or how to change something, reach out to Jesus Christ and pray your concerns. Let His light shine upon you. The darkness cannot be overcome. Let us persevere at this unknown time and be beacons for all to see. Amen.