

December 25, 2020 – Isaiah 11:1-10 & John 1:1-14

It can be difficult to know where to start a story. Hollywood has been suffering through this dilemma for the better part of two decades. Ever since the Star Wars prequels came out, I think, movie studios have been obsessed with retelling every story they can find from an earlier and earlier point. Essentially, writing a new beginning to every classic tale. No one can decide where to start the story.

And it seems at first glance like even the Gospel writers weren't immune to this phenomenon. Matthew thinks the best place to start the story of his Gospel is with Joseph finding out about Mary's unexpected pregnancy and the coming of the wise men. Mark thinks we should start with the ministry of John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Luke favors starting with the announcement of John the Baptist's birth to Zechariah and the announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary.

None of these starting points is wrong. They're all divinely inspired and perfectly suitable places to begin the story of Jesus' life and ministry. But my personal favorite is St John's starting point.

Because he doesn't start at Jesus' baptism. Or his birth. Or even the announcement of his birth. No, when John starts a story, he goes back to the beginning. To the very beginning. To the beginning of all creation. In fact, in a way, he goes back before the beginning.

*"In the beginning was the Word."* Go back to the beginning. To the very first moment of time itself. And then go back one moment further. And what will you find there? The Word. The Word who is with God. The Word who is God. The Word who is Jesus Christ. In the beginning was Jesus.

You can't make a prequel to John's Gospel. From John's perspective, the life and ministry of Jesus is the story of all creation. All things were created through him. Every moment of human existence is the story of the Word making and sustaining all things.

And yet, that's not the majority of John's text. In fact, thousands of years of world history are summed up in just those first three little verses. God was there before the world. God made the world. And then, the world went dark. Dark with sin. Dark with unbelief. Dark with death.

When it comes to world history. To understanding the history of humanity. To understanding humanity's accomplishments and acts of faith and righteousness. Well, from John's perspective, everything from the moment Adam and Eve fell into sin until the coming of Jesus is just the dark ages. It is not even worth mentioning.

Why would it be? Read the Old Testament. You don't find much on humanity's side that's worth praising. Mostly, you get a lot of doubt and unbelief. Idolatry and selfishness. Lust and violence and greed. Honestly, there isn't a single hero of the faith who doesn't have some very flawed, sinful moment.

No, the Old Testament isn't a testament to humanity's righteousness and faithfulness. It's a testament to God's plan of salvation. It's that plan of salvation that we've been discussing all throughout Advent.

The planting of a seed with the prophecy that one of Eve's descendants would crush the serpent's head. The growth of roots in the faith of the patriarchs, that God would always fulfill his promises, even if it meant raising the dead to do it. The water of Holy Baptism by which the tree of Jesse was sustained and given life. And now, today, we celebrate that a shoot has come forth from the stump of Jesse and has born fruit.

Or, to use John's imagery, the light has shined in the darkness. The light has entered into the darkness. To enlighten everyone. To show all the world the light of God's Word. The light of God's Law. The light of God's grace.

Isaiah describes that light to us. He came with a spirit of wisdom and understanding. The wisdom of the Gospel, which is foolishness to mankind. The wisdom that says in order to save the world, he must lose his life. And if you lose your life, you will be saved.

He came with a spirit of counsel and might. Not the counsel of worldly politics or the might of worldly kings. But instead, the counsel of the Holy Spirit, sent into our hearts. And the might of his grace, freeing us from sin and death.

He came with a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Not that he was afraid of the Lord or wanted us to be afraid of the Lord. Rather, he showed his disciples that all the power of God that could be used in wrath and judgement was now being used for our salvation.

Jesus shined the light of his spirit into the darkness of our world. And though there were those who refused to receive him, there were also those who did. Who believed in his name. And were given the right to become the children of God.

Children born just as Christ was. Not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor the will of man. But children born of God. Children born because the Holy Spirit came upon us and the power of the most high overshadowed us. Children who, because of our rebirth, are holy and sons of God.

We are those children. You see when you read John's Gospel, it might be easy to forget that the light that shined into the world then still shines into the world today. It was the Word that shines in the darkness. It is the Word that still shines into the darkness.

It was the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. It is still the Word that becomes flesh and blood and dwells among us at the Lord's Table. It was the glory of God that John saw in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. It is still the glory of God that we see in the grace and truth of this Holy Sacrament.

Today is Christmas. Christ's Mass. Christ's Divine Service. Christ's Feast of Holy Communion. A branch of Jesse's tree has born fruit.

Fruit exists to be eaten. Fruit exists to nourish us, to give us life and growth, to refresh us in body and soul. The Tree of Life stood in the Garden of Eden giving eternal life to all who ate of it's fruit. And now Jesse's Tree, the Tree of the Cross, stands among us, giving eternal life to all who eat of it's fruit.

And promising us a day when the grace and truth we see by faith in Christ will be seen in its fullness in the resurrection. *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased,"* the angels sang the night Jesus was born. Because of Christ's first coming, that peace extends between God and man.

Because of Christ's second coming, that peace will extend over all creation. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the young goat. The calf and the lion and fattened calf shall dwell together. For the Christ child shall lead them.

In that day, no one will be hurt or destroyed on God's holy mountain. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God. The light will no longer shine in the darkness. For there will be no darkness to shine into.

Instead, there will only be the light of the world, shining into every place. The root of Jesse standing as a banner before all people. Drawing all nations to himself. For his resting place – the empty tomb – will be his glory for all eternity.

So, in a way, John doesn't just give us a good beginning to the story of Jesus' life. He gives us a good ending too. For he points us to the cross and empty tomb. To the life we have in Jesus' name. And to the eternity we have in him. Amen.