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Thursday December 25, 2008  
Christmas Day  
Sermon preached by The Rev. Martha Wallace  
at Christ Church Washington Parish

The readings for Christmas Day seem pretty jarring, next to the readings for Christmas Eve. We left off last night with shepherds, angels, the baby in the manger and Mary pondering these things in her heart. We go home to a nightcap of eggnog and a Christmas cookie, and we come back in here on Christmas Day still warm and fuzzy and ready to sing *Joy to the World* and bang — the opening salvos of the Gospel according to John hit us square in the face:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

*Those who trust this Word find their place in God's creation.*

Beautiful, poetic John has no baby in a manger, no Mary, no shepherds, no angels. The advent of Jesus according to John is like the beginning of creation. Just as God separated the light from the darkness at the beginning of creation, so Jesus comes anew as light into our darkness, to show us the way. Perhaps the most striking thing about John's Gospel is his Portrayal of Jesus as the Word of God. That is Word with a capital W. Everything goes back to God's Word, God's self—communication to us. As John says, it is a Word uttered before creation began, a Word uttered to bring about creation, a Word that now is becoming flesh and blood so that we might hear it, and see it and touch it. Or more correctly, so we might see him and touch him and listen to him and follow where he leads us. John needs no infancy narrative to set the stage for the Jesus he presents in his Gospel. The backdrop John gives his Jesus is all of creation.

I don't know if any of you remember a movie called *A River Runs Through It*. In the movie, a fly-fishing, Montana Presbyterian minister takes his two young sons fishing. Being a good Presbyterian, he never overlooks an opportunity for teaching, and this fishing trip is no exception. When one of the boys finds a fossil near the river, the minister says to them:

*“Boys, this river flows through the land over the rocks to the sea. The rocks are half a billion years old, and they show the marks of rain drops that fell long eons ago. And underneath the rocks are the words of God. Listen.”* And they all lean over and listen to the gurgling river.

I think that fly—fishing Montana minister had been reading the Gospel of John. The Word of God is there, underneath everything — older than the rocks, more life—giving than water. It is the Word of God that calls the world into being; it is the Word made flesh that gives the world its meaning; and it is the Word Eternal that holds it all together. Underneath everything is the Word: solid, dependable, enduring, and true. By contrast, we live in a world that treats words as cheap, disposable, and devoid of permanent meaning. Any of you who live with

teenagers know that they regularly reinvent language by assigning new meanings to old words, leaving those of us who are older wondering what happened and why we can no longer communicate with them.

Politicians, no matter which side they are on, carefully plan their words for maximum ambiguity on the one hand, and maximum deniability, on the other. We have spin doctors to cast a new meaning on anything that causes a stir. Advertisers use words to create expectations their products can never meet. Contracts become longer and more complex to protect the parties from actually having to deliver on commitments made, and more marriage vows are broken than are kept. In this world of “what you see is not what you get,” it is hard to find anything one can rely on. In our jargon, we sum it up like this: “Talk is cheap.” — meaning, “Show us the truth behind the words.”

As a defense against this flimsy, coming—apart, unreliable world, we have another saying we use to swear our most solemn oaths when we mean to convey that what we have said is completely true and trustworthy, and that we will back it up with everything we have. We say: “I give you my word.” Have you ever said that? Has someone said it to you? If so, you know that it is meant to convey a trustworthiness and reliability not to be found in the ordinary course of things. It is in this phrase “I give you my word” that we have a good analogy for what the Gospel writer is telling us this morning: that God gave God’s Word. Literally. That Word is true and trustworthy, and we can rely on it, because God backs it up with everything God has — with everything God is. Indeed, God’s Word is part of God’s very being. Jesus is that Word, according to John, and he came to be among us as one of us — in flesh and blood — real — solid — reliable. We can put our trust in him. As John put it, “All who believe this Word receive the right to become children of God. Those who trust this Word find their place in God’s creation. Moreover, as followers of Jesus, they find themselves in the company of sisters and brothers who do not forsake them during the long hard days or the cold dark nights. This, too, is a gift of God for those who put their trust in the Word — who put their trust in Jesus.

In a few minutes, we will affirm our faith in God and Jesus in the words of the Nicene Creed. I know you can say it by heart, but it is also printed in your service leaflet. It begins, “*We believe*”. The Latin word for “*I believe*” is *Credo*, and it has undergone a transition in meaning since the Nicene Creed was written. When we say “I believe in God” we understand that to mean that we think God exists. But in the original Latin of the Nicene creed, “*credo*” or “*I believe*” meant “*I put my trust in . . .*” I ask you to indulge me this morning, when we say the creed together. I invite you to substitute the words “*We put our trust in*” for the words “*We believe*.” Let’s try the first line together. “*We put our trust in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.*” See how that changes things? The creed is now not so much about what we think is true of God as much as it is about our relationship with God. The point of the creed is not so much as a test of right thinking or right believing as a test of right reliance or right trusting. The one we put our trust in is way more important than any particular characteristic of God, any one thing we think to be true of God.

This Christmas morning, instead of being all sentimental about the baby in the manger, it is good for us to reflect on the fact that the baby in the manger is nothing less than God’s Word, and God’s Word is true and trustworthy and reliable. We can count on it. We can take it to the bank. We can depend on it. How do we know that? We have God’s Word on it. Literally. Amen.