

Nativity of the Lord

Christmas Day

December 25, 2019



John 1: 1-14

The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

A reflection from a mission co-worker* serving in Egypt

Last fall, September 7th almost came and went without my notice. Like the other 7,305 days since our first arrival here in Cairo, the day included work, friends, and plenty of traffic. Nevertheless, September 7th marked the 20-year anniversary of our work here in Egypt.

As we celebrate Advent in the days leading up to Christmas, I am mindful of how difficult it can be to actually know the significance of an event when it occurs. David McCullough's recent book on the Wright Brothers described the first successful flight of their engine-powered plane at Kitty Hawk. While beautifully written, the account is most striking in the way it describes the absence of fanfare or crowds. According to McCullough, just five other people witnessed what is arguably one of the most significant moments of the 20th century and one of those observers just happened to be walking on the beach at the right time. Today, every license plate in the state of North Carolina depicts an event that went almost entirely unnoted and unwitnessed at the time.

Throughout the past two decades, we have experienced so many moments that originally seemed utterly unremarkable only to find their significance revealed years later. Back in the first course I ever taught in 1999, I had an incredibly bright and inquisitive student who would stay after class asking one interesting theological question after another. As I was just learning Arabic at the time, my wife*

translated throughout the lecture and into the seemingly endless question and answer sessions afterwards. We would often return to our apartment after these marathons both inspired by students like this one and exhausted from the effort. Today, that student has his Ph.D. in theology from Princeton Seminary and leads our faculty as ETSC's academic dean. While seemingly unremarkable at the time, those conversations were the start of two decades of collaboration, friendship and partnership in the Gospel.

When I read so many of the central stories of the Bible, it strikes me how often these crucial events occur far from the epicenters of power and influence. The God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to have a preference for out-of-the-way places and obscure settings. God made the covenant with Abraham in solitude, outside of his tent and under the stars. It was while Gideon was threshing wheat secretly in a winepress that God called him to liberate the Israelites from the Midianites. And of course, the birth of Jesus: God Incarnate, seems to have been witnessed by more animals than people. In each of these cases, God set something of tremendous import and influence into motion with almost no flash or buzz. The Bible portrays God's marketing strategies as very different from many of our own.

The pyrotechnics of the world continue to catch my attention. Headlines scream out and sensational claims trigger my clicks. Nevertheless, God's transformative power seems to be seen much more in retrospect than it does in looking for the sensational at present. Most of the past 20 years has been filled with the banalities of language acquisition, lecture preparation, and the work of teaching. Yet, it is precisely in and through these moments that God has worked most powerfully in and through our lives. We are so grateful for the innumerable ways that God has changed us, taught us, and strengthened us in the everyday events. I cling to these memories in the hopes that God will use the moments in the days ahead in remarkable ways, discernable only in retrospect. All of this seems wonderfully appropriate in Advent as we ponder God's choice to be Emmanuel, that is "God with us" in an obscure manger in Bethlehem.

*Name withheld for security reasons.