

Jesus Changes Everything: Advent 2009

Receive Him Third Sunday in Advent

December 12/13, 2009

Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Jesus Changes Everything: Receive Him

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 1:10-13

Introduction

The word "expectation" applies to the Third Sunday in Advent. Derived from the Latin *ex* ("from") + *spectō* ("to look"), the idea is *to look* at something *from* some distance away. Fully aware that it is coming, all attention is focused on its arrival. In effect, persons who *expect* are eager to *receive*. Whereas last week's emphasis was on the preparation for the Messiah's coming, as expressed by John the Baptizer, we now actually see the Lord coming down the road and expectantly await his being with us.

Ironically, not all who heard John's message were eager for the Lord's return to Zion. The prophet characterized the advent of God with words of both blessing and judgment. Those who submitted to preparatory baptism were challenged to "repent," that is, embark on a radical agenda change, setting aside selfish plans and receiving God's purpose instead. Some, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, came out of curiosity or to pass judgment — the official spies for the Temple authorities. To them, John demanded, "Vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance ... for the axe is already laid to the root of the tree..." (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7).

Shortly after Jesus' baptism by John, many who once followed John became followers of Jesus. They were ready *to receive* the Lord. Eventually they would become his disciples and the weight of kingdom responsibility would fall on their shoulders. Would they be able to "drink the cup" of Christ to the point of ultimate sacrifice (Matthew 20:22-23; Mark 10:38-39)? *Receiving* the Lord meant not just *accepting* him, as if somehow he met *their* approval. Rather, it invited wholehearted commitment to the Lord of the world who would come to his glory by way of the cross.

This week's attention falls on such themes, as we consider the momentous choice facing us by the soon arrival of Jesus.

This Week's Main Text: John 1:9-13

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

We are treating 1:9-13 as a unit since it is bound together by some recurring words: "light," "world," and various forms of the verb "to come." The transitional term is "light" (1:9) which echoes the assertion in 1:8 that John the Baptizer was *not that light* but became the credible witness *to the light*. Through this literary technique, the writer moves the reader to the continuing descriptions of the Word as "life and light" in 1:4-5.

Earlier, in 1:1-5, the Word appears as Creator of life, and, thereby, becomes "the light of men" (1:4). As we have previously noted, the pre-existent Word, the pre-incarnate Jesus, was active throughout the created order. Natural phenomena bore the imprint of the light. Torah, Israel's Scripture, shed light on the will and purpose of God. In each case, the Word is the agent of God's illumination throughout His Creation. The Old Testament

bears witness to the creative Word of God, and John's Gospel declares that this Word is none other than *God the Son* before he became *Jesus of Nazareth*. Thus far, in the Gospel's telling of story, the Word remains "with God" acting from the platform of "the beginning." All of that now changes in 1:9-13.

The True Light (1:9)

Our reading begins with a somewhat awkward grammatical construction in the original Greek. The writer begins with the verb "to be," an unusual Greek construction but quite common when ideas are translated from Hebrew sources into Greek. The single *ēn* ("he, she or it was") corresponds to the Hebrew *wayehîy* ("and it was the case that..."), a common form of the verb "to be" which introduces a narrative sequence. This suggests that the material which follows is a new development in the story of the Word. Up to this point, the Word *as Light* enlightened human beings and did battle with darkness, proving itself the undefeated victor (1:4-5). These activities of the Word took place *from the standpoint of Eternity*, that is, *in the beginning*. Theologians refer to this epoch in the story of the Word as the "pre-incarnate" One: Jesus before he became a human being. It may come as a surprise to some of our readers that before he became a human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the second person of the Trinity was fully active in Creation and as "the Light of the World." Recall our previous study, two weeks ago, where we learned of the Word's work in making the world and then, subsequently, by bestowing life on it, radiating his glory throughout. The pre-incarnate Word appeared to God's people throughout the Old Testament, often in human form, and sometimes as angelic messengers.

Jesus, during his earthly ministry, made general reference to this fact in the later accounts of John's Gospel. Here are some examples:

⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple (John 8:56-59).

Notice the temporal reference to Abraham "seeing my day" and to Jesus' existence "before Abraham."

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

References in this passage to "our fathers" places the story in the Old Testament where Moses led Israel through the wilderness on their way to Canaan. The allusions to "cloud" and "sea" connects the text with events surrounding the Exodus, whereas the food and drink language points to passage through the wilderness. Paul explicitly equates the experience of Israel with "the Rock" who is "Messiah" (Christ).

²⁰ And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹ Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²² Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³ And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. ²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." ²⁵ He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods" (Daniel 3:20-25).

The phrase "a son of the gods" (3:25) is later connected with God's "angel" (3:28). Elsewhere this special angel is called "the Angel of Yahweh," or "the Angel of the LORD." This is special language used to identify the pre-incarnate Word before he became Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore, when we read in 1:9 about "the true light" lighting every human being, we are expected to connect that reference to the work of God the Son in the Old Testament and among the nations.

The phrase *to phōs to alēthinon* ("the light the true one") implies "the authentic light" or "the real light," as opposed to a conjectured light (as in the case of John the Baptizer) or a false light (as in the case of darkness masquerading as light). The word *alēthinon* points to the genuineness of the light in question. This is not *reflected light* but the very *source* of light itself. John the Baptizer gave a true witness to the light, but he

himself was not the true light. We know when we are in the presence of *true light* when we see it lighting *everyone!* By way of example: a candle gives light, but is itself not the source of light. To the ancients, the Sun would have been considered both the *source* of all light and the means by which all things become visible. Without question, human beings in Old Testament times knew "light" in its various manifestations, but they also knew the source of that light. The writer of John's Gospel is saying that the Word was that source and whether or not everyone knew it as *the Word*, they nevertheless experienced its universal presence giving them light. The text speaks of the "true light" (*to phōs to alēthinon*) "lighting" (*photizō*) everyone. The verb form is present active, implying a continuous illumination of the world by this light. The word comes closest to the idea of "shining, illuminating."

As a powerful force in the universe, "light" was venerated by the ancients. Whether in popular religious thought or in philosophy, *phōs* was an all-pervading influence, and the Sun symbolized its origin. Perhaps the most concise statement of this in Hebrew thought appears in this passage:

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light (Psalm 36:9).

The concept of God having His own light ("your light") as distinct from that which illuminates the world implies a light source within God Himself and not limited to the Sun alone. The philosophers also had this distinction when, like Socrates, they spoke of "the Good" in terms of the light of the Sun, though not the same as the Sun.¹ In Christian thought, the light of the Good is none other than the Word whose pervasive influence illuminates Creation itself.

But with 1:9 a dramatic shift takes place in the life of the Word. What was from the beginning the source of all things and their constant illumination suddenly *enters the universe*. The Word becomes at once *the irradiating source* and *the incarnate presence*. The text is succinct: *erchomenon eis ton kosmon*, "was coming into the world." Prior to this, John's Gospel speaks about everything having life *in the Word*. But now the Word takes up his own life *within* the world itself. He *comes into the world*. The import is more than just having a passing, momentary presence within the world as an ephemeral force or influence. The Word is making a *bona fide* entrance *into* the world. In some unspecified way, the Word is becoming part of the world while not at all losing his being as "with God" and as "being God." The introduction of this fresh development requires further explanation, and the writer will now oblige.

In the World (1:10-11)

Creating a literary link with 1:9, the writer at the outset of 1:10 speaks once more of "the world" and the connection which the Word has to it. He writes: *en tō kosmō ēn*, "in the world he was." This is a significance departure from his exalted place in 1:1, where we were told "in the beginning the Word was." The retention of the verb "to be" in the imperfect tense (as in 1:1 and throughout) but applying this mode of *being* to the Word *in the world* is truly remarkable. The Word is given both a mode of being *in the beginning* (with God, was God), *and* yet another mode of being *in the world*. The Word does not merely *visit* the world as did the pagan gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman myth. Rather, by stark contrast, he makes the *kosmos* (world) his mode of being. He is present *for the duration*, continuously and consistently. He binds himself to the world with inexorable ties.

What are we to make of this shocking claim? The writer adds to the irony with his further words, "and the world was made by him." We might call this the *metaphysical paradox*² for it places side-by-side the pure fact of his role as *Creator* with his unlikely status as *creature*. How can the Word be both? To this irony, he adds

¹ James A. Notopoulos, "The Symbolism of the Sun and Light in the *Republic* of Plato, II" *Classical Philology*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Oct., 1944), pp. 223-240. Especially see Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," *The Republic*, Book VII.

² The word "metaphysics" has a number of uses in our language. We use it here in its proper philosophical sense, referring to the ultimate nature or "being" of things. Philosophers often distinguish between *metaphysics*, which has to do with "what exists," and *ontology* which pertains to "how it exists." Any view of origins, including the Judaeo-Christian one, naturally involves metaphysics and ontology.

yet another one, namely, the *epistemological paradox*.³ Though he made the world, the world did not *recognize* its Creator. Would not the world recognize their Creator when he became a creature in their midst? Did not Jesus, the incarnate Word, leave his unmistakable signature on the world through all he said and did?

Furthermore, 1:11 continues the irony. We might call this the *moral paradox*. The possessive word "own" appears in the text in two distinct forms. "He came" *eis ta idia*, that is, "into (or unto) his own things." The adjective is in the neuter, suggesting the word "things" used in the general sense of the universe *itself*. Compare this with 1:3 where "all things" (*panta* also in the neuter form) are made by the Word. The force of the preposition *eis* is to *thrust* the Word *into the very being* of the things he has made. His "coming" places the Word within the same context as all the things he created: he comes to be *among them* as *one of them*. Yet, in spite of this uniting of himself with the world he made, *his own people* (Greek: *hoi idioi*, the second form used in the masculine plural) do not *receive* him (Greek from: *paralambanō* used in the aorist tense). This second instance of *idios*, being masculine, puts the adjective in a personal form rather than a neuter one. Though intimately joined with the world he had made, those within that world most likely to acknowledge him, refuse to do so. I take the aorist form of the verb "receive" to mean a *decisive non-choice*. That is, his own *people*, Israel, willfully and consciously refuse his deeply intimate advance toward them by becoming one of them. Herein lies the moral paradox: a rejection of the Word by moral creatures who owe their very existence to that Word.

By Creation and Incarnation, the Word approaches the human race and joins his being with it. The whole of the Word's history is implicated in the world he has made. By choice, the Word throws in his lot with his creatures. Sadly, by choice his creatures decline his good-faith effort. This refusal, being moral, has now become quite personal.

As Many As Received Him (1:12a)

At the heart of the Prologue (1:1-18) lies this verse. You may recall in our first study two weeks ago how the form of the Prologue is a chiasm whose convergent point comes at this juncture. The whole sweep of the *Logos* (Word) story intends to lead us to receive him. Within 1:12-13, the writer makes his case for responding favorably to the Word's intimate arrival into the world. As if to restore the honor of the Word, at first shamed by human rejection, the writer offers an invitation to his audience, complete with the benefits which accrue to those who accept. Advent is, indeed, about a "coming," but one which requires a response. The incarnation is God's invitation and the recipients must RSVP! They *cannot* remain neutral. They *must not* remain neutral. Everything remains in the balance until they decide. No decision *is* a decision. As Kierkegaard once wrote, "choice...does not depend so much upon deliberation as on the baptism of the will..."⁴

The phrase "as many as" is from the Greek *hosoi*, what scholars call a *correlative pronoun* which communicates the ideas "as much as, as great as, how great, as far as, how far, whoever, as many as, all, everyone, to the same degree as." The extend to which human beings *receive* is the extend to which God will favorably respond. There are no favorites with God, nor does He arbitrarily include some and not others. Human beings cannot charge God with partiality nor can they find fault with His justice. Even as we noted in a previous study, the Lord of history "stands at the door and knocks. If anyone hears...and opens..." he will enter (Revelation 3:20). Or as the parables of Jesus generously implied: Everyone is welcome at the table, as the Master sends his servants into "the highways and byways" seeking guests for his banquet (see Luke 14:23). Indeed, he asks his servants "to compel" them to come.

³ Epistemology is the branch of philosophy known as "the theory of knowledge" which tries to answer the questions, "What do we know and how do we know it?" Christian theology presents a view of knowledge which includes not only natural perception and understanding, but also that which comes through *revelation*. "Faith" is its own way of *knowing* God and the world. We do not set faith against other ways of knowing, but recognize the complementary role faith has in enhancing our grasp of the world's richness and depth.

⁴ In this regard, Soren Kierkegaard offered helpful counsel in his *Either/Or*, vol. II, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp.163-164, 166-169. Also see his *Fear and Trembling* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Contained in the single Greek word *hosoi* is the whole mercy of God, and that mercy is "rich" in love (Ephesians 2:4). He is unwilling that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). That is why blatant refusal carries a deep moral penalty. What is fair recompense for those who spurn the pure grace of God?

How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:29).

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled... (Hebrews 12:15).

The phrase "received him" (Greek: *elabon auton*) gains traction in the way we present the Gospel to unbelievers. We call upon others to "receive Christ" into their hearts and lives. We ask, "Have you received Christ?" And we are not always understood. What did the writer mean when he used that expression? Forms of the verb *lambanō* appear throughout John's Gospel:

1. Him (Jesus) (1:12, here).
2. His fullness (1:16).
3. Our testimony (3:11).
4. What is given from heaven (3:27)
5. His testimony (3:32, 33)
6. Me (Jesus) (5:43; 13:20)
7. Spirit (7:39; 14:17; 20:22)
8. My (Jesus') Words (12:48)
9. The Words you (Father) gave me (Jesus) (17:8)

In each case, the possibility exists that something (or someone) can be either received or not received, and, in some cases, the instances of actual rejection are cited. Thus, the fact of *critical choice* rests on this word. Parallel understandings can be found in the Synoptic Gospels where certain parables involve invitations which are either ignored or declined (Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:15-24). In other parables Jesus tells of the tenants of a great king's property who refuse to extend courtesy to his servants and finally to his son (Matthew 21:33-46). Then there are the instances where receiving others is equivalent to receiving Jesus himself:

Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me (Matthew 10:40).

Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great (Luke 9:48).

Receptivity of others is, on all accounts, an act of implicit trust. To open myself to another is to allow access to my innermost being, including thoughts, feelings, and intentions. It is to allow possession of myself by another. This includes a high level of vulnerability and exposure. As one philosopher expressed it, trust is not merely placing faith in another; it is to disclose to another the degree to which I trust them. Trusting another with the knowledge of my confidence in them is its own special form of trust.⁵ It is trusting with trust itself! All of that is contained in the simple idea of "receiving Christ."

The meaning of "receive" is found in 1:12 where the structure of the verse places "receive" in direct parallel with "believe." The writer has separated the phrases in the original Greek to create this parallel, although most translations try to bring them together, placing them in apposition to each other. For example, the NIV translates this verse: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name...", and thus achieves the nearly synonymous meaning of both verbs. The Greek, on the other hand, accomplishes this in the following way:

⁵ Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust," *Ethics*, 96, January, 1986, pp.231-260.

But as many as received him
He gave to them authority
children of God to become
To those believing into his name

There is clear linkage between "as many as" *elabon* ("received") and *pisteuousin* ("to those believing"). The evidence that one has *received* (aorist tense — decisive action) the Word is that one is actively *believing* (present tense — continuous action) the Word. To receive Christ means more than an intellectual assent or emotional response. Faith means trust in a deliberate and persistent sense.

Curiously, the noun for "faith," *pistis*, is absent from John's Gospel, though it does appear in the Johannine letters and *Revelation*. There is a preference for action words — for verbs — when nouns are also available. Raymond Brown remarks:

That John prefers the verb *pisteuein* to the noun shows that the evangelist is not thinking of faith as an internal disposition, but as an active commitment. The double "Amen" with which Jesus prefaces his important statements is a call for a believing reliance on him and on his word.⁶

The writer prefers the preposition *eis* following the verb, suggesting "believing *into*." We find the following usage: John's Gospel, 36 times; *1 John*, 3 times; elsewhere in the New Testament, 8 times. With a few exceptions, *eis* following *pisteuō* points to belief *in a person*, whether God the Father or Jesus. In some cases, "to believe" is coordinated with "to come to" (see 6:35; 7:37-38), and this reinforces our impression that to "receive and believe" implies *action*. More than mere trust or confidence, these various terms strongly indicate *acceptance of Jesus and who he claims to be, resulting in a dedication of one's life to him*. This is not the same thing as saying faith *plus works*, rather, it clarifies the meaning of faith, giving it depth.

Authority To Become God's Children (1:12b)

The phrase "children of God" is based on the Greek *tekna theou*. Commentators generally point out that the writer does not use "sons of God" (*huiōi theou*) probably because he reserves the term "son" for Jesus and his unique relationship to the Father. In 1:13 the text gives a fuller explanation for the phrase to which we will turn eventually. For the moment, we need to reflect on the implications of being considered *children of God*.

This is a favorite appellation for identifying Christ followers in the New Testament, as the following cases show:

John 11:52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one *the children of God* who are scattered abroad.

Romans 8:16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are *children of God*,²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Romans 9:8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are *the children of God*, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

Philippians 2:15 that you may be blameless and innocent, *children of God* without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called *children of God*; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

¹⁰ By this it is evident who are *the children of God*, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

1 John 5:2 By this we know that we love *the children of God*, when we love God and obey his commandments.

While we do not see explicit references to "children of God" in the Old Testament, there are certainly instances where God refers to *His people* as "my children/sons/daughters," as in these cases:

⁶ *The Gospel According to John*, in the *Anchor Bible* Vol. 29, p. 512.

Isaiah 45:11 Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him: "Ask me of things to come; will you command me concerning *my children* and the work of my hands?"

Isaiah 43:6 I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring *my sons* from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth...

Jeremiah 3:19 I said How I would set you among *my sons*, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me, *My Father*, and would not turn from following me.

"Sons of God/Lord" also appears:

Deuteronomy 32:8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of *the sons of God*.

Deuteronomy 14:1 "You are *the sons of the LORD your God*..."

God's saving of His people from Egyptian slavery (the Exodus) established them as uniquely His son:

Hosea 11:1 When Israel was *a child*, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called *my son* (see this in reference to the Advent of Jesus in Matthew 2:15).

For God to call someone "my son" also entailed a special status, as in the case of David and his descendants:

1 Chronicles 22:10 He shall build a house for my name. He shall be *my son*, and I will be his father, and I will establish his royal throne in Israel forever.' (also, 28:6)

Psalms 2:7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are *my Son*; today I have begotten you" (see the New Testament connection in Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5; Revelation 21:7).

The father-son relationship is an Old Testament theme when describing God's bond with His people:

Psalms 103:13 As a father shows compassion to *his children*, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.

Though Yahweh God clearly saw Israel as His *children*, and collectively as His *son*, there are surprisingly few direct references to these privileged titles. As noted above, persons like David and his royal successors received the authority to become the "sons of God" from God Himself. Calling someone "son" or "child" of God was a huge attribution, possibly misunderstood as a pagan claim of descent from the gods. Since Israel's theology rejected all forms of idolatry, persons would be cautious in their appropriation of "offspring" language. Jesus encountered opposition to his claim to be God's son on the grounds that this made him "equal with God" (see John 5:18).

Therefore, when the writer of 1:12 speaks of persons as "children of God," he takes care to say that they have this privileged status because they are *authorized* by the Word to claim the name. The Greek word used in 1:12 and commonly translated as "authority" or "right" is *exousia*. In our earlier studies, we noted Paul's use of the word in conjunction with his "rights" as an apostle (see 1 Corinthians 8:9; 9:4-6, 12-18; 10:23). In classical usage, this term can mean "power or authority to do a thing, power over, license in a thing, an office, magistracy, abundance of means, or resources." When the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible uses the word *exousia*, it renders a range of concepts: the secure royal *storehouse* (2 Kings 20:13), the *commands* from a king or his representatives (Esther 3:13; 4:17; 8:12), the Lord's (or other ruler's) *dominion or rule* (Psalms 113:2; 135:8-9), *power* over something (Ecclesiastes 8:8), persons with *official* status (Daniel 3:2), or *promotion* to new *status* (Daniel 3:30).

When a new status is granted, God lies behind the promotion — this the consensus of Old Testament texts where *exousia* appears in Greek translation. To be called "children of God" requires a direct act of God in John 1:12. It is not a self-bestowed title nor a presumptuously appropriated status. We are given a distinct *privilege* through the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. His coming into the world includes a *bona fide* offer to us which includes conferring on us a new relationship to God: as His beloved children, the fruit of the Father's love:

1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be *called children of God*; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Paul echoes these words:

Romans 8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are *sons of God*.

Romans 8:16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are *children of God*,

Romans 8:21 ... the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of *the children of God*.

Galatians 3:26 for in Christ Jesus you are all *sons of God*, through faith.

Ancient Israel saw themselves as God's beloved "Son" whom He had called out of Egypt and carried on eagles' wings, bringing them to Himself (see Hosea 11:1; Exodus 19:4). When appealing to Egypt's ruler, Moses tells him:

Exodus 4:22 "Thus says the LORD, Israel is *my firstborn son* ... and I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve me."

Addressing a divided and broken nation, the Lord, from a heart of compassion, promises:

Jeremiah 31:9 With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for *I am a father to Israel*, and Ephraim is *my firstborn*.

From the New Testament vantage point, the status as God's children carries with it a moral imperative:

Ephesians 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as *beloved children*. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This latter text reminds us of the connection between our new status as God's children and our original status as image-bearers of God. What God conceived, in the beginning, by creating human beings, was that they might be bearers of His image in the world, His holy representatives who had authority to declare His nature and His word to the rest of creation. With the arrival of the *new creation*, God authenticates His royal message of good news through His children, both by what they say and what they do. Jesus Christ, the Word, is God's unique Son, but "the children of God" are authorized to represent the person and work of God's Son. The Advent of the Word ultimately leads to the formation of a new family who owe their existence to him.

Begotten from God (1:13)

Advent ordinarily includes references to the extraordinary conception of Jesus through the Virgin Mary. The last passage in this week's reading, 1:13, includes with the words "who ... were begotten..." (*hoiegennēthēsan*). When we think about the Advent story, it's natural to focus on the *conception* and *birth* events of *Jesus*. No doubt that conception/birth was on the minds of some who transcribed the text of John's Gospel when they came to this verse. A very few, though notable writers felt that the text before them must be a copyist's error; they chose instead to write "who was begotten" (*hos ... egennēthē*).⁷ Those who made this change in the text were largely Latin writers, and likely wanted the virgin conception/birth of Jesus to be in view (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr). On the other hand, the manuscript evidence for the plural form ("who were begotten") is so overwhelming as to make the argument irrelevant. However, the Latin fathers probably saw the deeper connection between Jesus' own God-directed birth and the new birth of those who became followers of Jesus. Obviously the new birth of Christians could hardly take place without the virgin birth of Christ, they reasoned. That said, John's Gospel at this juncture focuses on the "children of God" whose conception/birth is due to God alone.

⁷ For a concise discussion of the issues see John W. Pryor, *Novum Testamentum* 27 no 4 O 1985, p 296-318. A thoughtful discussion of the significance of 1:13 for the role of Mary appears in "Spiritual Motherhood of Mary in John 1:13," by: Bernard J. Le Frois, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 13 no 4 O 1951, p 422-431.

The writer of 1:13 forms his words carefully and arranges them in a well-balanced multi-part framework. They look like this:

Who (*hoi*)
Not from bloods (*ouk ex haimatōn*)
Nor from will of flesh (*oude ek thelēmatos sarkos*)
Nor from will of man (*oude ek theēmtos andros*)
But from God (*all' ek theou*)
Were begotten (*egennēthēsan*)

The subject is *hoi*, the plural form of the pronoun "who" — a reference to the antecedent, "children of God" in 1:12. Grammatically, the pronoun is separated from its verb by a series of consecutive prepositional phrases which all use the word *ek*, meaning "from." The nouns, in each case, which follow this preposition are in the genitive case, and this combination almost always implies *origin* or *source*. Having declared in 1:12 that those who received the Word by believing on his name acquire a new status as God's children, the writer proceeds to explain how it comes about that they now have this honored standing with God. Had you asked the religious authorities where Israel derived its privileged relationship to God, they would have cited their birth connection to Abraham and the covenant God made with him. Consider:

John 8:39 They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were *Abraham's children*, you would be doing what Abraham did,

In a later exchange between Jesus and the Jewish leadership, the boundary lines for spiritual sonship are willfully drawn, as the leadership calls into question the antiquity of Jesus' claim and Jesus, in turn, pre-dates himself with respect to Abraham:

John 8:53-59 ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" ⁵⁴ Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Jesus' response to his detractors implies that since he existed *before Abraham*, he is able to make possible children from an even more ancient source: God Himself. Moreover, the sonship of Abraham's true offspring is bound up with that of Jesus. For Abraham to "rejoice" in the "day" of Jesus means that Abraham had prophetic vision capable of peering into the future through type and symbol and see the one who was greater than Abraham himself.

In the early preaching of John the Baptizer, he called into question this claim of covenant sonship with these words:

Matthew 3:9 [Luke 3:8] And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

John 1:13 goes farther by declaring that those who received the Word by believing in his name become "children of God." However, in both case, God is the agent of making persons His children (even if they are stones!).

The Greek word *gennaō* can be translated either "born" or "begotten." The dominant meaning, "begotten," describe the male role in causing the conception and birth of a child, and it would have been understood against the background of the physiology known at the time. According to J.H. Bernard⁸ ancient Greek physicians thought the embryo came from the mother's blood and the father's seed. Furthermore, Garland notes, "The predominance of the male over the female was also demonstrated by the belief in the primary procreating function of the male sperm over the secondary female womb. In the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, Apollo professes

⁸ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, ed. A.H. McNeile, 2 vols., Edinburgh: Clark, 1928, I, p. 18.

himself to be of the opinion that the mother is not the parent of that which is called the child, but only nurse to the newly-implanted seed. It is the one who mounts who is the true parent. This belief found an echo in a number of myths."⁹ From Bindom we learn:

The primary theory of conception in Ancient Rome was the doctrine of the two seeds. According to this doctrine "both parents created semen." Democritus, an ancient physician, believed that this semen was derived from the whole body "particularly the important parts such as bones, flesh and sinews." Because both parents produce semen they both have the opportunity to contribute to the traits of their children. The parent with the dominant sperm contributed the most characteristics. Hippocrates wrote that if both parents produced strong sperm the child was male. If both produced weak sperm the result was a female. If one parent produced strong sperm and one weak the sex of the child would be determined by the stronger sperm... Ancient Romans believed that the heat of lovemaking determined the sex of the child. Hippocrates wrote that coitus creates a "pleasure and heat" throughout a woman's body. (*On the Generating Seed and the Nature of the Child* 4). This heat peaks with the introduction of sperm into the womb and then dies down. According to Galen this heat determines the sex of the child."¹⁰

From these extracts of ancient biology comes the prevailing ideas for the *physical* element of human conception. What is most striking about 1:13 is the way "bloods," a plural noun, is excluded from the conception of God's new children. Following the general belief about ordinary conception, the writer states emphatically that God's begetting of His children is completely different. Also, unlike the predominant understanding of the rabbis who opposed Jesus, the New Testament writer rules out any physical aspect from the new life God "begets" through the agency of the Word. Becoming children of God is not about human pedigree, whether Jewish or otherwise. The biblical view rules out any demonic notions of breeding a master race (as in Nazi Germany), and it also contends with any who would make race a determining factor for the people of God (such as white supremacists in the U.S.).

Furthermore, the writer offers a couplet of phrases which both contain the word "will." Behind the Greek word *thelēma* lies the notion of "desire," and even "lust."

1. When used with the word "flesh" (*sarx*), *thelēma* suggests the desire associated with human frailty and powerlessness. By itself, the word "flesh" as *sarx* simply identifies mere animal life within a human body, subject to sickness, weakness, and death. Flesh is ruled by the powers in the world who are hostile to God. Indeed, "flesh" may well equate to servitude and bondage to the natural forces which impinge on human beings.
2. The second instance of "will" is connected with "man," taken from the Greek *anēr*. There is a distinctly masculine and gender-based meaning to this term. From the classical lexicon by Liddell and Scott we discover the following things about *anēr*:
 - a. Man as opposed to woman.
 - b. Man as opposed to god.
 - c. Man as opposed to youth.
 - d. Man as husband opposed to wife.
 - e. Man as an emphatic: "He's a real man!"

These uses support the prevailing view of how human beings comes into existence — a view which gives the predominant role to the male. By contrast, God replaces *anēr* as the origin of "the children of God." All credit for God's new family accrues to the Word and not to a human male. By begetting children in this way, God brings into existence a whole new way of being human — one which transforms human life both in its physical and social dimensions. All of the old categories for human domination and priority are replaced by God-directed ones.

The categorical assertion that the children of God are begotten from God and not from anything else is given strong support in John 3 where Jesus tells the Jewish leader, Nicodemus the following crucial truths:

⁹ Robert Garland, "Mother and Child in the Greek World." *History Today*, 36 (1986), pp. 40-6.

¹⁰ Sharel Bindom, *Ancient Gynecology*. Internet: - <http://www.bama.ua.edu/~bindo001/N/A>, (2000).

John 3:3-8 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The phrase "born again" can also be translated, "born from above," since the Greek adverb *anōthen* can have either meaning. The term "born" is the word *gennaō* used in 1:13 and probably should be treated as "begotten" rather than "born." The emphasis is on the *origin* of those who experience this *genēsis*: they are "fathered" by God through the Spirit. By using the word "flesh" (*sarx*) the Gospel writer maintains coherence between 1:13 and 3:6. The contrast is between an origin due entirely to human nature and that which comes from "above" and from "the Spirit."

The thrust of 1:12-13 is about origins — new origins for God's people. Perhaps the virgin birth of Jesus lies in the background as the paradigm or template for the writer's teaching about our new origin. Certainly the church fathers thought so (see above). Even as the Christ child took form in the body of the Virgin Mary absent the agency of a human father, so also the life of the Word takes shape within those who are declared to be "children of God."

Paul writes in similar ways when he pens these words: "My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" (Galatians 4:19). A strangely familiar Advent theme surfaces here. Calling them "little children," Paul both speaks endearingly of his charges and also declares their true identity as the newly begotten children of God. The notion of "formation" as a spiritual process receives definite support in this text. Much could be said about what it means for "Christ to be formed in us." In some ways, the giving of new life belongs to God's role as "begetter," while resurrection — yet future — is the proper counterpart to new birth. However, between the two is a continuum along which we find sanctification and spiritual growth. Paul surely means all of these. And Advent is the yearly sign that God continues to bring new lives into His kingdom who are not the product of human design but the wondrous fruit of His new creation.

Concluding Thoughts

Properly, Advent shed fresh light on the conception and birth of the Christ child. We are inspired by the word of the angel to the Virgin Mary:

Luke 1:35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy- the Son of God.

And this finds its counterpart in the message of Joseph:

Matthew 1:20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

From texts like these, we draw new hope that human life can take a new turn and move in a new direction. Yes, the virginal conception of Jesus is real history, challenging as that might be to the Enlightenment mind. To be human means more than DNA, and the story of Jesus confirms that in a myriad of ways. In turn, the virginal conception has implications for our own re-creation in the image of God. That is the point John makes in 1:9-13, as he invites "as many as" will receive the Word to do so, and with highly favored status as the outcome: children of God!

From an unknown source comes the aphorism, "The Son of God became human so that humans might become children of God." The writer to the Hebrews agreed, and citing some ancient Hebrew Scriptures, made the following observations:

Hebrews 2:11-18 11 For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, 12 saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." 13 And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has

given me." 14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. 16 For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Advent declares the "one origin" of both Jesus and his brothers, begotten by God, sharing in flesh and blood, liberated from sin. A lifetime of slavery is overcome by the freedom of God's children: "If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed!" (John 8:36). Faithful and merciful is the Word who comes into the world. Deliverer and helper is the Word who gives us the authority to become "children of God."

The Readings

From the lectionary this week, we hear readings which share some of the themes found in John 1:9-13. We are reminded by Zephaniah that the Word was "in the world," as the words "in your midst" are repeated, and the prophet reminds God's people that He is "mighty to save," as the Lord "gathers" His people and "restores" their fortunes. From the Psalm in Isaiah 12, we hear triumphant praise from "the daughter of Zion" and "the daughter of Jerusalem." The Hebrew Bible affirms the use of feminine language to describe the children of God! After all, as God's children, we are both *son and daughters*. Both terms celebrate the new status God has given His people who together "draw water from the wells of salvation." From the Epistle, we are reminded of a simple truth "the Lord is at hand," which is at the heart of the Advent message. Finally, the Gospel reading brings us back to the birthing waters of John's baptism where Israel hears about the vipers in their midst but also about the hopeful baptism of the Holy Spirit who is able to raise up, even from stones, God's new covenant children!

Old Testament Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. 17 The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. 18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. 19 Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20 At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the LORD.

The Psalm: Isaiah 12:2-62

"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." 3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. 5 "Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. 6 Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

New Testament Reading:

The Epistle: Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Gospel: Luke 3:3-18

3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" 7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to

flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 9 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" 11 And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." 15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, 16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

The Prayers

Thematic

God of hope,
you call us home from the exile of selfish oppression
to the freedom of justice,
the balm of healing,
and the joy of sharing.
Make us strong to join you in your holy work,
as friends of strangers and victims,
companions of those whom others shun,
and as the happiness of those whose hearts are broken.
We make our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Intercessory

Brothers and sisters,
as we joyfully await the glorious coming of the Christ,
let us pray for the needs of the church, our community, and the world.

Prayers of the People, concluding with:

God of joy and exultation,
you strengthen what is weak;
you enrich the poor
and give hope to those who live in fear.
Look upon our needs this day.
Make us grateful for the good news of salvation
and keep us faithful in your service
until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives for ever and ever. Amen.

Scripture

O God of the exiles and the lost,
you promise restoration and wholeness
through the power of Jesus Christ.
Give us faith to live joyfully,
sustained by your promises
as we eagerly await the day when they will be fulfilled
for all the world to see,

through the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Jesus Changes Everything: Receive Him* — Third Sunday in Advent
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Jesus Changes Everything: Receive Him*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Read this week's Advent text, John 1:9-13. Write down the key words which anchor the main themes of this passage. Offer some tentative definitions for each one.
2. How did the Word "give light to everyone" prior to the coming of Jesus into the world? What groups of people, discussed in the Old Testament, were special recipients of this light? What form did the light take?
3. The expression "was coming into the world" (1:9) marks a change in the relationship of the Word to the world. To what event does this "coming" refer?
4. What does it mean for the Word to be "in the world"?
5. In 1:10 the writer describes a paradox or an irony: what is it?
6. Discuss the additional paradox found in 1:11. Who are the people referred to as "his own"? In actual terms, how was this true for Jesus? Give some examples, starting with his birth.
7. Did all of Jesus' "own" reject him, according to 1:12? How did people show that they "received him"? Explain what that means, using the whole verse as part of your answer.
8. What special status does the Word confer on those who "receive him"? Using the following texts, show how this status grows out of the teachings of the Old Testament: Exodus 4:22; Isaiah 45:11; 43:6; Jeremiah 3:19; 31:9; Deuteronomy 32:8; 14:1; Hosea 11:1; 1 Chronicles 22:10; 22:10; 28:6; Psalm 2:7; Psalm 103:13.
9. What does the New Testament teach us about being "children of God"? Read the following passages as you consider your answer: John 11:52; Romans 8:14, 16, 21; 9:8; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 2:15; Galatians 3:26; 1 John 3:1, 10; 5:2.
10. John's Gospel provides a more detailed explanation of becoming "children of God" in 1:13. Identify and explain the negative and positive meanings of that idea as described in the verse.
11. Terms like "blood, flesh, male" when applied to human status conjure up what images? How are God's children dramatically different from those images?
12. How did the Jewish leadership understand their status as "children," according to John 8:53-59 and Matthew 3:9? How did Jesus and John the Baptist challenge that understanding?
13. In his conversation with Nicodemus, how does Jesus explain being "begotten/born" of God? How does he contrast this with other ways of being begotten/born?
14. During Advent, we emphasize the "virgin conception/birth" of Jesus. How does his conception/birth relate to ours? Why is Advent an appropriate time to examine our relationship with God through Jesus Christ?