

In the beginning was LOGOS

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I have been ruminating of late, chewing over some thoughts about Christmas and the Gospel stories. I would bet that most or all of you, like me, know well and love deeply these stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. There is a sweetness in listening again to the story of the traveling couple who have come to Bethlehem for the census, only to find that there is no room in the inn. The innkeeper, filled with compassion at Mary's plight, offers them space in the stable, and Mary, having given birth, wraps her precious baby in swaddling and lays him in a feeding trough. The angels serenade the shepherds, and announce the birth, and the shepherds hurry to find the stable, and the family resting amidst the ox and the ass and the other animals.

In our minds, we unconsciously merge the stories as told by Luke and Matthew, as we anticipate the arrival of the wise men, mounted on their camels, and bearing gifts of gold, and frankincense and, oddly, burial spices.

These stories are fleshed out in our imaginations by way of the evocative carols. Baby Jesus lies "Away in a manger" in the "Little Town of Bethlehem," sleeping to the lullaby from "Angels we have heard on high". We select and send our Christmas cards, with images of Baby Jesus sweetly sleeping in his mother's arms. After all, "The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes!." It — all of it — is wonderful.

But then this gentle serene story butts up against the news. And it is jarring. Last year we were all aware of the sufferings of frontline soldiers in Ukraine, shivering in frozen trenches. They are still there, but this year, Christmas festivities in Bethlehem were cancelled, and our attention is distracted by the attack on Israel in October, and the suffering and death of some twenty thousand civilians in Gaza. There is war and suffering elsewhere too, but those stories have been pushed off the front pages and the leading segments of the evening news.

So I have been wondering of late about how the hard realities of our world affect this primary Christian story, and how our engagement with the story of God's Son being incarnate as a human being affects how we understand what is happening in the world around us, and how we respond to it.

My ruminations led me to a vivid memory. Six years ago, in February 2017, opera fans in Silicon Valley revisited Christmas. I attended an Opera San Jose performance of Kevin Put's new opera, "Silent Night."

Let me set the scene: The staging is quite spare. A plain grey and dull blue backdrop represents the sky over a barren battlefield. The story takes place in December 1914, somewhere in the war zone of northeast France. On the otherwise bare stage, there are three structures that represent trenches. One trench has a war-torn and faded

union Jack, one a French tri-color in similar condition, and one a worn German flag. It is dusk, December 24. Flashes of light behind the scrim, and the pounding of the orchestra's timpani represent cannonading. In the dim light, figures, obscured by deep shadows, emerge in the three sets of trenches. From the German trench we hear weary men singing "Silent Night" in German. The song ends. A French carol is heard, again the voices betraying great weariness - and wariness - of soldiers in combat. Followed by an English hymn.

A soldier tentatively emerges from one of the trenches. "Chocolate. We have chocolate" he sings out. There is an audible stir in the other trenches. A soldier from another trench warily steps into the opening, his rifle in his hand, but hanging down at thigh level. "We have brandy." More reaction. From the third, a soldier appears with a tin container. "We have biscuits."

Slowly, these war-weary men let down their guards - and their weapons, and begin to intermingle on the opening. Food and drink is shared. They show one another tattered photos of loved ones from their wallets, and they sing together, each group sings for the others. There are some humorous bits as they struggle with the others' languages.

Watching the opera unfold, I was overwhelmed. I sat there, wiping tears out of my eyes. And I was not alone.

The scene eventually ends with a blackout. In the darkness on stage, we see the shadows of the stagehands moving the trench structures to the back of the stage, and placing three large chairs on the stage, each equidistant from the others. The chairs are throne-like. When all is ready, three sharp spotlights illuminate three generals, seated. The staging and the lighting make it clear that we will visit each army headquarters in turn. The generals open the scene with a clever trio; three voices, in unison, in three different languages. Then each sings on their own. Divided by language and loyalty, the three generals share one thing in common: Total fury at the betrayal by their own troops. Each, promising retribution, the severest punishment and reassignment to the most dangerous sections of the battle line for the officers who not only failed to control the situation, but who had themselves the audacity to temporarily lay down their guns and lay bare their shared humanity.

The opera ends as each of the units is marched off in turn, to more dangerous areas of the battlefield.

I love opera. I have been many times, to San Francisco, San Jose, San Diego, and elsewhere. No other opera experience has ever impacted me as much as did this performance of "Silent Night." I have, for years, known about the Christmas truce of 1914, seen at least one movie, and read several articles over the years, some challenging if such an event ever actually happened. But this opera brought the story to life, and ended it all with a gut-wrenching hint at the death that awaited those who had so glaringly violated the fundamental commandment of war; "Thou shalt hate thine enemy."

And I share this recounting here to introduce a conversation about the Gospel reading today, the beginning verses of John's Gospel.

The prologue to John's Gospel acts very much like an opera overture, introducing themes, *leitmotifs* if you will, of beginnings; Creator and creation; light and darkness; faith and life... and of course, God and Jesus. A weird word is introduced, "Logos." A Greek word typically translated "Word", but most directly related to the English word "Logic," The placement of this word hints at a deeper meaning that seems to elude us.

The first fourteen verses of Chapter 1 feel like poetry and feel like mystery. In the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus begins at the River Jordan; his baptism and the voice of God from above the clouds, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased!" In Matthew the story begins with Joseph's dream and Jesus' birth. In Luke, it begins with the Annunciation of the Angel to Mary that the power of God would "overshadow" her, and she would conceive a child who would change the world.

But here, in the Gospel of John, the story of Jesus begins at the beginning... the Big Beginning. John's Gospel starts with the Greek word that is the exact translation of the Hebrew word that begins the Hebrew Scriptures, "arché". The word means "beginning". You remember: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth...". That is echoed in John, with a twist: "IN THE BEGINNING was the Logos. And the Logos was with God. And the Logos WAS God. He was in the beginning with God, and all things came into being through him..."

I believe my subconscious mind was onto something when I woke up one day early this week with a vivid memory of the opera I told you about. (I trust my subconscious!). I had been researching the texts for today, and I found something that caused me to just stop in amazement.

There is another place where the word "Logos" is used in ancient literature, but in a very different way. I want to tell you about Heraclitus.

Heraclitus was a Greek philosopher of Ephesus, near modern Kusadasi, Turkey around the year 500 BCE. According to Gil Bailie, author of "Violence Unveiled", for Heraclitus, the "world" began with human violence, albeit a violence structured by some mysterious organizing principle. Heraclitus sensed that violence behaved in accord with an enigmatic logic of its own, which he called its Logos. This Logos, or *logic of violence* made it possible for violence to both create and destroy. Heraclitus wrote:

War is the father and king of all things; he has shown some to be gods and some mortals, he has made some slaves and others free. ... Everything originates in strife. ... Strife is justice; and all things both come to pass and perish through strife.

Now we can see more clearly. Let's look again at the headlines in the news. It's not hard to defend Heraclitus' view of how the world is organized. I do believe that there are many, many who, although they have no clue as to Heraclitus was, are truly disciples of his understanding of a world organized in, and controlled, by violence.

And now, we open the Bible to Genesis, and read the account of God creating and ordering the universe, not with the organizing principle; the Logos, of violence, but rather by his peaceful intention. And at the end of each day, God looked upon his creation and "saw that it was good."

We read the beginnings of the Gospel according to John. "In the beginning was the Logos. And the Logos was with God..." We wonder, what is *this* organizing principle? And the gospel writer whispers back to us. "Hey, it's not "what". It is "who". "And the Logos was with God. AND THE LOGOS WAS GOD."

At the end of today's reading, we heard: "And the Logos became flesh, AND LIVED AMONG US, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."

If you, like me, have felt the poetry in this singular and beautiful text, and wondered what it was that just eludes your grasp, this may be it.

Jesus came into a world as violent and chaotic as it is in our day. His message, his Good News, was simple: The Kingdom of God is near. Jesus' ethic, his moral foundation, stands in sharp contrast to the logic of power, and domination and control. "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven.'" (Mt 5:43-45)

In Jesus' day, some turned away at this. It may be that Judas Iscariot, who hoped that Jesus would lead an uprising against the Roman occupiers, became disillusioned at the ethic of Jesus as he heard it preached at the Sermon on the Mount.

And ever since, we erstwhile disciples of Jesus have excused away the ethic of Jesus as not applying to, oh, you know...., War, and politics, and global economics, and the environment..

A very well known classicist, Sarah Ruden, recently produced a fresh translation of the Gospels. Her translation is beautiful, and challenging. It makes me think. In her footnotes and appended glossary, she discusses her efforts to capture the deeper meaning of the Greek word "Logos." In her glossary entry for "Logos" she writes, "The essential connotation here is not language, but the lasting, indisputable and morally cogent truth of numbers, as displayed in correct financial accounting: this is the most basic sense of logos. 'True Account' is among the translations that can be justified on occasion."

So Ruden selected 'True Account' for Logos. Here is how it sounds:

At the inauguration was the true account, and this true account was with God, and God was the true account. He was, at the inauguration, with God. ...

and it concludes...

And the spoken word, the true account, became flesh and blood, and built a shelter and sojourned among us, and we gazed on his slender, a splendor that a father's only son has, full of joyful favor and truth.

I find a strong echo to Jesus's words later in John's Gospel, "I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life.'

As followers of Jesus who live in this real, and chaotic, and violent world, we are challenged to pray, and consider, and ultimately to decide which organizing principle will guide us; which Logos is the very being of God who deserves our worship and allegiance.

The organizing principle proposed by Heraclitus is, as has always been, having it's day. But Jesus calls out to us, don't be deceived, and led astray by the promise of power and victory, and domination. That is not how God works, really, in this world. And for proof, we have Christmas; the poor traveling couple, and shepherds, and angels, and wise men, and an infant; fragile, dependent, wrapped in swaddling, and laid to in an animal's feeding trough.

And we sing and our hearts swell at the Logos, the True Account, the Word Made Flesh, who pitched his tent, and dwelt among us.

Merry Christmas!