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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/25/2011, Christmas Morning  
Isaiah 52:7-10, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-14  
Our Being and Our Bliss

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Fr. Charles Trexler, of blessed memory, used to love to preach here at Immanuel on Christmas morning. That's because he especially loved the appointed Gospel for today, which is from the First Chapter of St. John.

Here at Immanuel we all love St. John the Evangelist because *here he is*, part of our magnificent rear altarpiece. He is the figure on your right. Moses is on the left, Jesus in the center, and John on the right. John is distinguished from the other evangelists - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - by the eagle there at this foot. The eagle befits John because his Gospel has always seemed somehow the most majestic and elevated of the Gospels. Certainly the words of this morning's text are golden. St. John's Gospel, then, begins with these sublime words:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God; <sup>3</sup>all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

To help us enjoy this great text, I would like to borrow a line from the old English commentator Matthew Henry. The line goes thus:

...he [Jesus Christ] is appointed the author of our *bliss* who was the author of our *being*. (Matthew Henry<sup>1</sup>, John 1)

Here Matthew Henry is saying that our God is both great and good. His theme is that the God who *saves* us is the same God who *made* us in the first place, and so he has plenty of strength for the job.

So, there are two parts to Matthew Henry's saying. Jesus is the author of our *being*, and Jesus is the author of our *bliss*. Let's take them in order.

## **FIRST, AUTHOR OF OUR BEING.**

First, *Jesus* is the author of our being. When we work our way through this morning's Gospel text, that is the conclusion we reach: a baby who was born in a stable in Bethlehem two thousand years ago is the author of our being.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry (18 October 1662 – 22 June 1714) was an English commentator on the Bible and Presbyterian minister. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew\\_Henry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Henry)

The world little knows this. There are good folks on our city sidewalks passing by our church this very morning, off to brunch, off to Grandmother's house, off to do many good things, and they little know that their being, their life, their very existence at this moment is due entirely to the desire of a Jew born long ago that they should live. He is unwilling that this world should be without them, and therefore they are!

And it is little wonder that these innocent passersby on the sidewalk do not reckon with this idea, because it is an exceedingly strange idea, now isn't it? We can understand the notion that other human beings *influence* our life, but it is a different order of things to say that another human being is the *author* of our life. Aye, and not only our life, but they lives of everyone else too.

Perhaps you were here a couple Sundays back for our Christmas Pageant. Baby Jesus was played by one-year-old Tyden Tota, whose parents, Amy and Jon, played Mary and Joseph and whose older brother is Dash. I was entirely enchanted to watch baby Jesus in the arms of Mary, his mother. We should picture the real baby Jesus that way: at first he rested contentedly in his mother's arms, then he stood up in her lap to look at the angels, and the shepherds, and the Wise Men, with all the Bible readings and Christmas carols. Then he got bored with that and gave his attention to his mother, caressing her face with his hands and squirming around a bit.

Then, a week later, we were able to watch baby Jesus dance, there at the St. Nicholas Party, when Tyden stood before Al and Vi and the band and danced along to the music. His father, Jon, told me that that is the only time when Ty wasn't moving around: when he simply stayed in place and danced to the music.

Now, it is quite a trip to go from a baby in the arms of his mother, Mary, to the thought that this baby is the author of our being. But that, indeed, is what we believe about the real baby Jesus. This morning's Gospel Lesson helps to explain it.

St. John teaches that our being is connected with the Word of God, *which in turn* is connected with the Babe of Bethlehem, according to John's great saying about the holy incarnation of our God:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... (John 1:14, RSV)

Our very existence, even this moment, depends on Jesus.

## **ST. JOHN ENLARGING THE PERSPECTIVE**

St. John, with his elevated, majestic eye, is enlarging the perspective on Christmas. Last night we celebrated the nativity of our Lord, with the beautiful story of the shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night, then the angel of the Lord, and the Gloria sung by the heavenly host, and the babe lying in his mother's arms in the stable. Now, St. John enlarges our perspective on this Child. He teaches us that this Child existed long *before he was*

*born*. This isn't true for you or me or for anyone else. None of us are the incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. None of us has a being that precedes our birth. But Baby Jesus does. He was alive long before he was born.

How long before he was born? Well, according to St. John, Jesus had a being that reaches back in time to the beginning -- indeed, *before* the beginning. Before there was earth or sky, fish or birds, dinosaurs or big bang or anything at all, there was God and there was his Word. They were intimately connected, just as your words are closely connected with who you are. St. John puts it this way:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, RSV)

We believe in "one God in three Persons." I suppose that God the Father and his Word and their Spirit could have been content with each other, by themselves, for all time. They did not need to create our world. They did not need to create you and me. But they resolved to make us and our world. It seemed good to them. They could have done without the world, but the generosity of their hearts was such that they wanted our world to be. They wanted the fish and the birds, the dinosaurs and the great whales, they wanted sun and moon, and they wanted you and me. Therefore we are.

St. John says that we were made "through" the Word.

All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. (John 1:3, RSV)

This in turn leads good, old Matthew Henry to speak of the intimacy between God and his Word in our creation:

God made the world by a word (Ps 33:6)<sup>2</sup> and Christ was the Word. By him, not as a subordinate instrument, but as a co-ordinate agent, God made the world (Heb 1:2), *not as the workman cuts by his axe, but as the body sees by the eye*. (Matthew Henry, John 1, my emphasis)

And that Word was born a baby in Bethlehem long ago. So, that is the first half of Matthew Henry's claim: the author of our bliss is first of all, the author of our *being*.

## **AUTHOR OF OUR BLISS**

Now, for the second part of the saying. The Child of Bethlehem is also the author of our bliss.

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<sup>2</sup> By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. (Psalm 33:6, RSV)

Let's go back to our Epistle Reading for the Third Sunday of Advent. That particular Sunday is called "Rejoice Sunday" because of the day's Epistle Lesson. It starts off with this simple verse:

Rejoice always (1 Thessalonians 5:16, RSV)

Paul's command to be happy is part of a long, wonderful string of pastoral exhortations:

... Be at peace among yourselves. <sup>14</sup>And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. <sup>15</sup>See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. <sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup>Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup>but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup>abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:13-21, NRSV)

Now, some of these good things need be done only when the time is right. For example, we should "encourage the fainthearted" when there are fainthearted folk about. But if there are none in sight, we can let that exhortation rest until it is needed. Likewise with admonishing "the idlers": If everyone is hard at work, then we can let the admonishing go until it is needed.

But the wonderful thing about our particular text is that there is no limitation on it:

<sup>16</sup>Rejoice *always*, (1 Thessalonians 5:16, RSV)

Some good things slide in and out of season. But this good thing is always the perfect thing. We are to rejoice always.

Now it is Christmas morning. Last night we heard once again the great greeting of angel of the Lord to the shepherds abiding in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. That angel spoke of joy, now didn't he?

<sup>10</sup>And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you *good tidings of great joy*, which shall be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11, KJV)

When St. Paul urges Christians to rejoice always, I think this is his reason why: he wants Christmas to be the happy foundation of our life. No matter what we do, or what comes our way, whether it be good or bad, nonetheless we will let nothing deprive of us our rock solid stance that life is good. Reality is fundamentally good.

This is why our message to the world is called “the Gospel.” “Gospel” means “good news.” At the heart of our faith, there is good news. A Saviour has been born unto us. And therefore life is going to turn out well.

We humans are built for joy. When we are young, we rejoice in our strength and energy. I mean, little children don’t even pay a thought to the fact that skipping down the sidewalk is inefficient and burns energy. What do they care about energy? They have it to burn.

And when you got older, many of you became beautiful and handsome. You took joy in your good looks and well you should have, because they brighten this world for everyone.

And you could take joy in your career, joy in the flourishing of your family, joy in a red mustang convertible (which one of my colleagues recently bought, much to the delight and admiration of Carol and me), joy in your skills and seasoning.

But the thing is, all of these sources of joy are a bit fickle. Youth, strength, beauty, health, prosperity, even friends and relatives: we can lose all of them, and if we live long enough we probably will.

Yet, St. Paul calls us to “rejoice always.” That’s because the loss of our advantages does not mean the loss of our Saviour. Nothing in all reality -- neither height nor depth, powers or principles, or anything of such sorts -- is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore we always have reason to rejoice.

Is it any wonder that the Christmas carols we sing are such happy hymns? “Joy to the world,” “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice (“with heart and soul and voice.”) “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” “Angels We Have Heard on High” (singing “Gloria, in excelsis Deo.”)

Never really forget that happiness of Christmas carols, whatever else is going on in life, for those happy hymns point to the very foundation of the apostolic exhortation to “rejoice always.” That is, they point to Jesus Christ our Saviour, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.