

Prepositional Faith

Prepositions are the stepchildren of language. A preposition is a “connecting” word—a linking word. It identifies the relationship between parts of a sentence, like a verb and some other part of the sentence. For example, “He went.” Went is a verb, and technically that’s a complete sentence: subject and predicate—noun and verb—actor and action. But, while the sentence is complete, the thought is not. “He went”, but where did he “went”? You could say, “He went the store”, and probably communicate the thought; but that’s awkward. You need a preposition to describe the relationship between the verb, “went”, and the predicate nominative, “store”. We need a preposition: “He went **to** the store.”

Now, is this fascinating, or what? Didn't you get really excited about English class in school—especially when you were studying prepositions? I rest my case: prepositions are the stepchildren of language. Little-bitty words: in and through and for and by and over and under and above and below and to. Boring.

Still, they're pretty important parts of speech: prepositions. And they're important in our faith. Take today's text, for example. Listen for the prepositions:

(COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 NRSV) *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the*

head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Pretty impressive stuff, huh? He is over all creation, before all things. All things were made by him and for him; and in him all things hold together.

And listen to the way John's gospel begins:

(JOHN 1:1-5 NRSV) *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

The prepositions of our faith leave little doubt. For the Christian, the center of our universe is the one whose birthday celebration is the focus of all our Joyful worship and all our preparation for the Joy of this season.

And listen to the way John closes out this section we call the “prologue”:

(JOHN 1:14 NRSV) *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth.*

Did you catch that? The one who was with God in the beginning, made his

dwelling *with us!* And not only did he come *among us*; he became flesh, *like us*.

A Gallup Poll was released on the first Sunday of Advent 25 years ago. A random telephone interview was conducted with 1,006 adults. Those interviewed were asked, "What makes Christmas important for you?" 33% of the people polled said the birth of Jesus was what makes Christmas important. 44% said family time is what makes Christmas important.

The poll suggests that we won't let a little religion get in the way of a really big holiday. I heard about two women walking down the street in Chicago looking in store windows trying to find Christmas presents. One of them saw a nativity scene in one of the store windows. She turned to her friend and said, "Would you look at that. The church is even trying to get a piece of Christmas."

It is significant to note that those who identified themselves as Christians responded differently than others: 37% of Christians said the one thing that was most important about Christmas was the birth of Jesus—slightly more than one in three. Not only was there a difference in the way believers and non-believers responded, but there also was a difference in the generations. 26% of those in the age group 18-34 said Jesus' birth was most important, while 39% of those age 65 or older said Jesus' birth was most important. William Willimon, Dean of Chapel at Duke University said, in response to the poll, "The studies show we really don't know why we are singing 'Joy To The World.'"¹

And why are we singing, "Joy to the World?" "The Lord is come". The one Matthew says is the fulfillment of Isaiah's ancient prophecy: "A virgin will conceive and bear a son, and will call his name 'Immanuel': 'God with us'."

How is "God is *with us*?" Jesus declared Himself to be Bread to eat, and Light in which to walk. He said He is the Door to all good things, He is the Good Shepherd to lead us, and to seek us when we go astray. He said He is the Vine in which all life resides, and we are branches that need to abide in Him for that life. He said He is the Way, the Truth and the Life; and even though we are appointed for death and the judgment, He is the Resurrection and the Life, and he that believes in Him, though he were dead, yet shall he live and never die.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is one I've told at the Lord's Table on more than one Christmas Eve. It's a story about a man: a good man, but not a particularly religious man. He was a good provider, a gentle father, and a sensitive husband; but when it came to religion, he was a cynic. He reasoned, "If God is real, and if God is good, why doesn't he do something about all the human pain and suffering?" "If there is a God, he doesn't care," he thought.

¹ (David Briggs, AP Writer, *The Daily Record*. San Marcos, TX, December 1, 1996, p. 2C.)

He didn't try to inflict his own beliefs on anybody else; in fact, he was quite supportive of his wife's faith, and of her deep commitment to her church. He encouraged her and their children to participate. It just wasn't for him.

One Christmas Eve, as his wife and his children were leaving for the candle-light service at church, a snowstorm blew in, several hours early. He had second thoughts about their going; but he said nothing as he waved goodbye to them. The snowfall quickly got heavier, and the man found himself standing by the front door, watching for his family's return.

While standing there he noticed a group of sparrows, huddled together on the lawn on the protected side of one of the hedges. The snow was getting deeper, and the birds seemed confused and disoriented.

Being a kind-hearted man, he went through the kitchen, out into the garage. He raised the garage door and tossed a handful of seed out into the snow, careful to let it fall in somewhat of a line into the garage. Then he went back into the house and stood by the door to see if the birds would move into the garage, out of the weather. But the birds just huddled at the edge of the bush, and the snow drifted higher around them.

The man decided they needed help, so he pulled his coat back on, and slipped out the back door, and around to the front of the house. He came upon the birds, intending to shoo them into the garage; but when he approached them, they scattered in every direction *except* the garage. He made several attempts, but to no avail. Finally, he gave up and went back inside, and took up his post at the front door. The birds reassembled under their hedge, and huddled against the cold.

"You poor, dumb birds," the man said. "If only I could become a bird and lead you to safety."

And suddenly he understood what Christmas is all about. Suddenly he knew what the prophet meant when he said, "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel: God with us.*"

God *WITH* us. That wonderful, powerful, meaningful preposition. It's all the reason I need to sing, "Joy to the World!"