

Christmas Day
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

December 25, 2017
Rev. Paul Moore

The Inside Sense

I confess, I am not a football fan. Oh, I learned to play the game when I was in high school; I know the basic game. I know that the ball isn't round, and that to score you have to get "behind enemy lines." I can even name some teams, but I would be hard pressed to name a player. And I'm happy in my ignorance.

When I served a church in deep south Texas, however, I learned something about football. I did a little quick-and-dirty tally one day. I figured out that 10% of the population of the town went to Church on Sunday (close to the national average,) but 25% went to the Friday night High School football games. Obviously, I didn't understand football.

The head coach was in my parish. He would give us tickets to the games and we would go. I began hearing stories about boys who looked up to their coaches more than their dead-beat dads, who could walk right by a school fight without getting involved if it meant staying on the team, and who would work well into the night to help a fellow player make the academic grade so he could play in the next game. I began to get a sense of what football was all about. It's as much about making men out of boys and good sportsmanship and how to handle honor and dishonor than making plays. It's as much about making heroes and memories as making high scores. Now, maybe, I have a sense of what football is really all about, the sense behind the sense, so to speak.

This morning's Gospel lesson gives the "sense behind the sense" of Jesus. We read the stories of shepherds and angels this time of year, and in a week or so, about wise men and gifts, and a very bad king. We get the sense that this baby is special. We know that he will go on to become a great teacher and miracle-worker, and that he will be killed, and that his followers will claim he rose again from the dead. We know that a world religion built up around his life, teaching, death and resurrection, one that we hold dear here in this church this morning, and all that is very special indeed. But does that get at the "sense behind the sense?"

To that end the evangelist pens these magnificent words. They almost read like poetry:

In the beginning was the word,

And the word was with God,

And the word WAS God.

And the Word was the light of life.

There was a man named John.

He was not the light,

He came to give witness to the light.

[The Word] came to his own and his own received him not.

*But to as many as received him he gave power to become children of God.
The word became flesh and dwelt among us,
And we have seen his glory,
glory like the only begotten of the Father.*

This is more than just "special." This is cosmic, mythic, world-shifting, game-changing, life-transforming—this is big, this is REAL big.

Just how big is it? There is a fantastic piece you can find on Vimeo or YouTube by a guy named David Foster Wallace. It is a commencement address, and the piece is titled, "What is water?" It starts with a story about three fish, two younger ones and an older one. The older one swims by and says, "Hey guys, how's the water?" After a while one of the younger ones turns to the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

He artfully describes how our daily lives are largely lived on autopilot, and the program that is running the show is really our egos, who are convinced that we are the center of the world, and that everything is measured in terms of its relation to my own concept of myself. It is unconscious, as unconscious as water to a fish. It is the matrix in which we blindly live. He goes to great lengths to show us how a liberal arts education really has one purpose. It's not so much to teach us how to think, but to crack open to us the amazing power we have to choose what to think about. He calls us to wake up and choose our thoughts rather than to have them handed to us, and he calls us to choose carefully, for some thoughts will destroy you, and others will give you life.

He rightly claims that all religious practice that is worth anything at all is designed to get us off the pedestal of ourselves, and to give us another ground to stand on. We Christians describe that ground as self-giving love. This child has the power to knock us off top dead center, into a different world, one lived from spirit rather than ego, one that has a solid footing on which to see the water. This is the real "sense behind the sense."

Jesus did not just come to bring us a new religion. He brought us a way to be authentically human. So, go ahead. Follow the Christ Child outside the temple of your thoughts for a moment. It's hard work, but the vistas you will see are literally heavenly. Your world will never again be the same.