

AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Jeremiah 31:7-14

John 1:1-18

It seems that nothing is as over as Christmas when it's over. The tree comes down, the wreath comes off the door, the decorations are neatly packed away for another year. We are putting away the ornaments and discretely disposing of the fruitcake, another Christmas gone.

On this second Sunday of Christmastide, before we return to what the church calendar aptly calls Ordinary Time, before we head back to the office or our Zoom stations on Monday, and settle back into a routine, the church looks over its shoulder one more time and wonders at the meaning of the birth we have celebrated. It calls this questing Epiphany, the revealing of the true identity of the one we have honored with gold and frankincense and myrrh, this one of whom we have sung that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

This year in the cycle, it's John's turn to explain it. He is perhaps the most gifted of the four gospel writers in his way with words, has the largest vocabulary, the most soaring and elaborate of poetic strokes, as he reflects on the meaning of the birth of Christ. His is not the story of an angel visiting a virgin in an out of the way place in the hill country of Galilee. He is apparently unaware of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, awakened by heavenly choruses. He knows nothing of the magi of the East who follow a star and trail it to Bethlehem.

He tells his story with a different perspective and starts much earlier than all the others. "In the beginning was the Word," John says. And by "the beginning," he means the beginning of time. When God looked out on space and saw the enormous void of nothingness. At that time before time, the Word was with God. In fact, nothing was made in the entire universe without that Word. And so, this is a God who stands as the origin of all that is, the winds, the waves, every delicate flower, every surging tide, every precious human life. This God bears the Word we long to know, the Word we long to hear.

And we know, immediately, because of the strange way John is speaking, that this Word is not an ordinary word, not a spoken word. It's not something God had to say, but something God had to do.

So, this Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory, glory as that of an only child seen through the eyes of an adoring parent.

Matthew gives us a genealogy for Jesus dating back to Abraham. Luke traces his line all the way Adam. Mark doesn't know what to tell us of Jesus' origins so he tells us nothing at all. But John wants us to know that before all time there was a Word in God's mind, a Word that was more action than speech.

It is not by accident that the symbol for John the evangelist is that of an eagle. High soaring and turning among the heights as eagles do. His introduction to the gospel is a soaring hymn, beautiful and majestic. And you can read its inspiring phrases and wonder at its turning repetition of words and get lost in its beautiful flight, never really seeing where it is he lands.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

What John wants us to know is something most of us have trouble believing and that is that God really cares about us, that God is concerned for us, does not want us to be strangers, and that in fact God has taken the initiative and put on flesh to dwell among us. God comes to us to bind us up in all the broken places, to heal our wounds and comfort our sorrows. To share our humanity and know our lot.

I like John's honesty about it. "No one has ever seen God," he says. And I think about the circumspect way in which God is never really seen by human eyes in the Old Testament. God came to Abraham as three visitors in the heat of the afternoon one day, but God was in disguise. Isaiah got a peek at the throne of God, "I saw the Lord high and lifted up," he said, but really all he saw was the hem of the royal robe of God.

God came to Moses in the fire of a burning bush, but Moses did not get to see God's face. And of course, up on Mt. Sinai, Moses begged just once to see that divine visage before he died, so God compromised a little and let Moses see his back, but never his face.¹

"No one has ever seen God," John says. And isn't that the truth? God not only hides that heavenly face from us but also hides altogether, or so it seems sometimes, as evil and chaos have their way in the world.

I don't know about you but I used to put God to the test when I was growing up, commanding appearances and signs, something a child thinks might prove something important. Naïve and cheeky!

"God, if you really exist, then make it thunder now!" "God, if you want me to pass my history exam, then put the answer to this question in my head now!" "God, if you really love me, then save this loved one from death, now." But "no one has seen God," John says, when called on command like that.

God is more elusive than our beckoning can commandeer. And what feels like the absence of God is sometimes what most weighs us down, what we labor under and by which we are heavily laden.

John wants us to know that more than we realize, the Word has become flesh and dwells among us, because while no one has seen God, we have seen Jesus, God's Word, the thing God needed to do, and because he is God's son, close to God's heart, he has made God known. In him we see God face to face.

¹Exodus 33:23.

And I know what you're saying to that, "I've never seen Jesus. He lived 2000 years ago and whatever there once was of him is long gone." In one sense there is no denying that. And yet it was the experience of the early church, and perhaps can be ours as well, that he abides with us still, closer than the breath in our lungs, more present than the blood in our veins.

There has been a lot written about the burnout among health care workers, physically and emotionally depleted by almost two years of caring for worst victims of the coronavirus. Yet, so many of them persist in their service to the sickest. And I wonder, when human hearts reach out to one another in compassion, is not something of the compassion and love of God expressed as well, in more than words; in flesh and blood?

God is there in the flesh in the kindness of harried transportation workers over this holiday period, overwhelmingly gentle with strangers, helping those who are delayed or canceled, absorbing others' frustration at situations beyond their control. There is something of the kindness of God expressed when another person is treated with respect, entertained as an angel unaware.

God is there in the flesh, in the birth of a child who may not be the child of Bethlehem so much as the child of human love, miracle of miracles, the intricately wrought creation of fingers and toes, eyes and nose, hair and skin, a being whose life and destiny is finally mystery beyond our understanding. A glory reflected in real substance. Whether that child is of our own body, or of the bodies of others far from here, it is the same mystery and blessing. Which is why the pictures we have seen this past year of parents grieving children swept away by floods and tornados have touched us so deeply.

God is there in the flesh in the tangible mercy of a few cans of soup, some cereal, and juice loaded into the grocery bag and donated to those in need. The tangible mercy of people caring for others as if they were family, the more able looking after the less able until they can get back on their feet. And there as well, when we write a check and send the aid where it is needed in this country and around the world.

God is there in the flesh in the quietness of prayer even when all you can hear is the silence, because the silence has its message too, the healing of the quiet that so eludes us at the center of our lives, as we sit and wait and feel the world about us fall mute as the whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. Perhaps as much as anything in this period when we seem to have no answers, or at least none that satisfy regarding the depth of human tragedy that we have seen, the only thing we can do is fall silent and wait upon God, even as we do all that we can to send help to those who suffer.

We see God no less than those who lived and walked with Jesus both saw him and didn't see him. The world took some convincing that God was in Christ in human form, reconciling the world to himself. It was a matter of proclaiming something quite extraordinary. God become flesh. God swooping down from heaven like an eagle and landing in human form. It is precisely the most unlikely and surely the most unthinkable prospect, except that it be God's doing.

What John wants us to know and we still struggle to believe is that God is not isolated in some ethereal heaven that we will only get to see when we die some day by and by. God is not some all-permeating gas in the universe. Not some disembodied idea, or philosophy, or presence that guided the Big Bang and then retreated to see what would happen.

John's confidence that the Word has become flesh does not mean that everything and everyone in the world is God, nor that the creation itself is God.

"What it does mean," says Tom Long, professor emeritus at Emory University, is that there is no experience so hidden that God's grace cannot find it. There is no soil so sterile that the seed of holy wonder cannot grow in it. There is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the light of God which even now shines in it.²

In a world such as ours, it is never easy to preach a message like that. The congregation expects miracles of the preacher; immediate answers to insoluble mysteries, the meaning of which may not be available to us this side of eternity. But the fact that we do not have immediate answers does not mean that there are no eternal truths, but rather that there are some that we are not yet ready to receive.

In the meantime, we have work to do in this world where the needs are enormous, and the suffering is great. We respond in flesh and blood, as God has given us the example in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who knew and experienced the depth of human suffering and responded with sacrificial love.

That, I would suggest is the best that we can do, to do as God has done in Jesus Christ, to respond to the suffering of the world with the grace and peace of God's love and compassion. To be patient with all that is left unanswered in our hearts, waiting for the truth that we will finally know, in God's time, a truth that will set us free.

Edmund Steimle, long-time homiletics professor at Union Seminary, used to say that the task of the preacher week in and week out is to proclaim a word from heaven in a hell of a world like this.

On this Sunday before Epiphany, that is, as I know it, the real heart of the gospel. To hold to that truth. To believe in that word. That God has come to us in flesh and blood, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Word made flesh dwelling both among us and in us. That is what we have celebrated in these recent Christmas weeks. It is the same truth we hold onto for dear life like a spar in a flowing current, the peace that our faith confers in and out of season, year in and year out; that God has taken flesh and dwelt among us, for dear life, indeed.

Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth! Amen.

² Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1987) p. 56.