

AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 3, 2010

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18

This is the weekend that we really wrap things up, quite literally. Christmas is as over as Christmas can be. The tree goes out to the street or the recycler, the stores are finishing their after-Christmas sales, the decorations are neatly packed away for another year. We are sweeping up the tinsel and treasuring in the heart the memories that get stored in a file in our minds marked “Christmases Past.”

Bill Entriken is always the last of us to hold out for Christmas decorations at the church, remembering that Epiphany, or Twelfth Night is really the end of Christmastide in the church’s calendar, so we leave the decorations up for this last Sunday of the season.

Whether you are glad to see these days pass and the frenetic pace slow down, or whether you wish you could hang on a bit longer to the spirit of these days, the season is changing regardless. It’s time to get a credit on the gifts that can’t be exchanged, and to freeze the fruitcake for a redistribution next year. (I once knew a pair of couples who as a joke exchanged the same fruitcake back and forth for twenty five years!)

Our thoughts are drifting forward now to the winter projects that lie ahead, the week in Florida in February, the usual grind of daily work at the office with none of the relief of holiday parties or the city festooned in twinkling lights to break the gray monotony.

It’s January now and life moves on. Christmas is over and the real world is back. We ought to have some kind of mid-winter holiday to break the doldrums. Valentine’s Day just doesn’t quite do it. And President’s Day is not much. In St. Paul, Minnesota each year, they have a Winter Carnival with huge ice sculptures and skating and skiing and outdoor events when it’s fifteen below zero. But you have to have Norwegian or Swedish blood to enjoy such things as that.

There is no getting around the fact that there is a letdown after the holidays and as we begin the new year, a kind of melancholy that is part nostalgia, part confusion, part delirium tremor as our body gets used to less sugar and less alcohol than we have allowed ourselves in recent weeks. So what was it that just happened this Christmas and what did it mean?

That’s the question the church asks this Sunday as it looks over its shoulder and wonders at the meaning of the birth we have celebrated, yet one more time. It calls this questing Epiphany, the revealing of the true identity of the one we have honored with gold and frankincense and myrrh, and with the commitments of our lives.

And this year in the cycle, it’s John who does the honors, who gets the chance to explain it all for us. He is perhaps the most gifted of the four gospel writers in his way with words. He 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 town in the hill country of Galilee. He is apparently unaware of shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, awakened by heavenly choruses. He knows nothing of the kings of the East who see a star in the sky and follow it to an inn at the end of the world.

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, before anything was created, the Word was with God. In fact nothing was made in all of the universe without that Word.

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

And 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 to Adam. Mark doesn’t know what to tell us of Jesus’ origins so he says 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 that 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, wants us to know him, does not want us to be strangers, and that in fact God has taken the initiative and taken flesh to dwell among us.

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 First 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, and he saw the hem of God’s robe, so big it filled the temple. That’s a lot of hem, a lot of fabric. But even Isaiah doesn’t say that he actually saw 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 God's visage and 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, at times, or so it seems. I don't know about you but I used to put God to the test when I was growing up, commanding appearances and signs. "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. After all, God is not some divine bellboy, front and center when we ring. God is God, and we are not, and that's an important distinction.

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.

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." But I say, "Not so." There is much of him for us to see in this world that God so loves. It is only a matter of opening the eyes of our eyes and trusting with the heart of our heart that he is among us in the world of flesh.

But like the sun itself, so bright that it burns our eyes to look directly at it, we see him better in what he illumines, like the landscape at sunrise.

This time of year, when the sun is so low upon rising, if I am early enough and walking East on 23rd Street or 14th, and I look all the way down as far as the eye can see, the sky and all the creation itself is ablaze with glory reflected by the rising sun. *Rosy fingered dawn*, the Greek poet Homer called it. The presence of a yet unseen glory, spreading across the earth and bringing it to life even in the cold and wintry city. God's statement of Creation triumphant more glorious than all the architecture that our hands have made!

He is there to be seen indirectly, in the flesh, in the birth of a child who may not be the child of Bethlehem so much as the child of our own love, miracle of miracles, wonder of wonders, the intricately wrought creation of fingers and toes, eyes and nose, hair and skin, a being whose life and destiny is all mystery beyond our understanding. A glory reflected in real substance.

He is really there, in what you can touch and see, in the tangible mercy of a few cans of soup, some cereal, and juice piled into the basket for a needy family that has less

to survive now that the flood of generosity for the holidays is over. The real mercy of people caring for people as if they were family, the *more* able looking after the *less* able until they can get back on their feet.

He is there in the flesh in the counseling work that the couple have started, their marriage challenged by struggles to communicate openly with one another, their lives drifting apart, less on the same path than when they first fell in love. But making discoveries now about the people they are and the dreams that they still share, and the fears that sometimes haunt them in the night. He is there as they grow and face the truth that they speak in the learning that they are doing together.

He is there in the flesh reflected by the hands of the surgeon who cuts out the tumor, the physician who feels the pulse and hears the heart and diagnoses the unknown. There in the hands of the nurse who sets the drip on the IV pole, and in the arrival of the hospice worker who comes in the middle of the night when no one else will answer your call.

He 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 and all creation awaits with eager longing his revelation.

We see him no less than those who lived and walked with Jesus both saw him and didn't see him at all. The world itself, after all, took some convincing that God was in Christ in human form, reconciling the world to God's self. 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.

What John wants us to know and we still struggle to believe is that God is not isolated in some ethereal heaven which 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,

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."

In Annie Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she writes about seeing a mockingbird dive straight down off the roof of a four-story building. "It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem..." she wrote. The mockingbird, wings held tightly against the body, descending at thirty-two feet per second toward the earth,

spread his wings at the last possible second and floated to the ground. Dillard came upon this scene as she rounded a corner and no one else saw it except her. She connected the bird's alighting to the old philosophical question about the tree falling in the forest. If no one were there to hear it, would it make a sound? "The answer must be," said Dillard, "...that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

In Jesus Christ, extravagant acts of beauty and grace are at work in our world whether we sense them or not. What we can try to do is to have the wit to pay attention, to be there and to notice, to see the presence of God for what it is whenever it appears, for it is all around us.

Over the holidays, I received an email from a good friend and former parishioner whom I married to her husband some years ago. They are parents of two wonderful teenage girls now. And this past summer we were in frequent contact for awhile as Marty, her husband, faced the same surgery that I had undergone last February, aortic aneurysm repair and a heart valve replacement.

Marty always came to church with Barbara but it was pretty clear over the years that Marty was not much on the whole religion thing. He always sat up in the balcony, which was about as close as he ever wanted to get to the preacher or the communion table. It's not that he wasn't a religious man, it's just that talking about it was not his thing.

I was not surprised to hear by email that Marty had been asked to be one of the Wise Men in the annual Family Christmas Eve service at 5:30, when the church is full of kids and the focus is on telling the Christmas story and having each of the participants, the shepherds and Mary and Joseph, and the Wise Men gather at the front of the church to make a living tableau.

Marty has been asked many times over the years to be a Magi. He looks the part, husky and tall, very regal. But he's always turned them down. Too close to the communion table, too much of a public display, I suspect. But this year he accepted. And it was his daughter Emily that forced his hand. "After all that Church has done for you," said Emily, "all the prayers, and all the food, all the support and encouragement, visiting you in the hospital, helping mom, the least you could do, dad, is be a King on Christmas Eve." And so he was, for *one* reason I suspect. Because over this past year, the Word became flesh for him and for his family, in acts of kindness and love, and it dwells among them full of grace and truth.

That's how it is with God, sometimes, like an eagle alighting among us, in extravagant acts of beauty and grace. And so the Word is made flesh and dwells among us.

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¹ Exodus 33:23.

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

I quote here, nearly verbatim, Long's retelling of Dillard's story. See Long, p. 57.