

THE MYSTERY OF THE WORD

John 1:1-18

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Since it's the beginning of a new year, most started packing away our Christmas decorations even as store owners are replacing their Christmas displays with Valentine cards, gifts and candies. It's time to move forward. But not so fast. According to the Church calendar it's still the Christmas season so maybe we should slow down and linger a bit more at Bethlehem's manger to remember and appreciate the mystery of God becoming flesh, to live with and through us with grace and truth.

Really that's what the miracle of the incarnation is really all about. It wasn't a one-time event stalled in time and space. The incarnation is an on-going, seamless story. Unless we grasp this truth we keep Christ's presence sealed in the nativity scenes under our Christmas tree.

Today's reading from the prologue of John's Gospel was chosen for this first Sunday of the New Year to remind us that Jesus was born to make new beginnings possible. That's why it's essential that we listen to this passage with new ears. It's poetry at its best but we need to get beyond John's poetry so we can hear the truth that sets us free from our preconceived notions of what God requires of us. We like to hear about the Word becoming flesh so we can be bathed in Christ's light and become children of God but do we hear the challenge that comes with it?

We are comforted on Christmas Eve when we hear that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son but it becomes harder to hear the rest of the gospel story. The Word became flesh to die for all flesh. The same Word present in the beginning at the creation reentered the human story to recreate sinful humanity in the image of God. Knowing this and the great cost God paid to assure our salvation is an essential building block in our spiritual formation especially when we acknowledge only Christ could pay the cost in full. But does his complete payment for our sins get us completely off the hook?

We all grasped at the news reports about Ethan Couch the young man who killed four people when he was sixteen driving drunk. Somehow he got off scot free when his defense attorney rationalized Ethan was the victim of "affluenza." He was spoiled rotten by his indulgent, wealthy parents. He couldn't help himself. He was raised in a pampered environment preventing him from knowing the difference between right and wrong. The poor boy couldn't help himself.

Truth be told at our worse moments we all tend to hide behind the affluenza defense. We sometimes do what we want, when we want and when it catches up to us we expect to be exonerated. After all, we are God's children and God wants the best for us. But we forget that God also wants the best from us.

So what else should we take from John's prologue to his gospel that will challenge us to allow the Word to become flesh in and through us? Simply believing Jesus is the flesh is not enough.

Besides believing in his name, acknowledging that Christ is God's Word we need to realize the Word became flesh so we might have "life in his name." That means we can only experience real life by entering into the Word, bonding with the Word, making intimacy with the Word our aim so we can begin to be faithful to the Word as he is already faithful to you and me.

When John speaks of the Word of God he uses the Greek word logos which means the mind and spirit of the personality of God coming into our lives. Think of what this means, God humbling himself in order to humble us for our own good.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were created through him."

John tells the story of God coming into the world differently from Matthew and Luke. Their narratives are from the human perspective with events and people coming together, sometimes in sync with and other times in opposition to the will of God.

John takes a different tact, framing his opening narrative in a more cosmic dimension beyond the scope of time and space. He set the stage using the words, "In the beginning," the same three words opening the creation story in the Book of Genesis. In the beginning the Word pre-existed and the Word of God, the Cosmic Christ was and is the agent of creation. All things were mad through him. Without him, nothing was made. And this same mysterious Word who was with God and is God became flesh "so we will not perish but have eternal life.

John continues, "The world came into being through him yet the world knew him not."

In this context the world can be defined as human society organizing itself outside of God's authority and as a result often in opposition to God's authority. That explains why the world didn't recognize Christ when he appeared.

John then goes on to say, "His own people received him not." They too rejected God's Word because he didn't fit in with their preconceived notions about God. You have to wonder if the chosen people didn't recognize God in the flesh how could the Gentiles be blamed for rejecting Jesus. As it stands there was blame enough to spread around.

Much later in John's Gospel we see the Roman governor Pilate as the unfortunate representative of the world system face to face with Jesus. Pilate hemmed and hawed when he was being forced by the religious leaders to condemn Christ and he could see no reason to crucify him. "What is truth?" Pilate asked, probably not with a sneer but with total sincerity. He really wanted to know. But to keep the secular system running on time Pilate gave into pressure and washed his hands of Jesus even though he recognized the truth in Jesus.

Earlier in John's Gospel Jesus said, "I am the truth." The Greek word John used for truth translates into the English word reality. "I am reality, I am what's real and eternal everything else is false and temporary. I am the one who creates and recreates." You might say Jesus came to push the restart button to create a new beginning for humanity so we can become real too.

We sometimes wonder when Jesus is going to push that restart button. Two thousand years have come and gone yet the world system seems to be chugging along leaving us to conclude despite all the hype God is nowhere to be found. But look again. God is here.

Two soldiers were fighting for their lives. In the lull of battle they looked out from their foxholes and saw the horror of war, wounded and dying men crying out for help. One of the soldiers shouted in anger, "Where is God?" Soon a team of medics with red crosses on their helmets and arm bands appeared out of nowhere and began treating the wounded and taking them to safety. The other soldier pointed to the medics and answered his friend's question, "There is God."

This illustrates the power of the incarnation. God becoming flesh in people whenever we follow Christ's example and lay down our lives for each other. Sure sometimes it seems God is nowhere yet when we least expect it God shows up. But keep in mind when God shows up we need to show up too. That's how the Word continues to appear, in your flesh and my flesh. Remember, we are the body of Christ and individually members of him.

God sees us as the opportunity and means to show himself to the world yet too often we use our affluenza as an excuse not to step up and get involved in the world's problems. When we do this we fail to see and trust in the Word becoming flesh in ourselves and people of good will. But when we take a second, long, hard look that's when we become an outward, visible sign of God's inward, invisible presence.

That by the way is the short definition of the word sacrament, "an outward, visible sign of God's inward, invisible presence."

As we gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate the body and blood of Christ given up for our salvation I encourage you to allow yourself to become enveloped in the mystery of the Word becoming flesh in us so we can become for others an outward, visible sign of Christ's inward, invisible presence.