

The First Sunday after Christmas
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RCL, All Years

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And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Word. In Hebrew, *davar*. In Greek, *logos*. We use it in many ways. A word is made up of letters. A word is what we speak or write. “May I have a word with you?” means a short conversation. “I give you my word” means I make a promise or vow. In Hebrew, *davar* can mean word in the simple sense, it can also mean a matter a topic, or even a legal case. In Greek it can mean all these and also a laundry list, a piece of writing, an idea, or in today’s text, God.

A word is the fundamental unit of communication. My mind and my thoughts are hidden from you until I express them. When I do express them, I have given you a gift of part of myself. To that extent I have made myself vulnerable. If I want to develop a relationship with another, I must speak. And I must listen. In the prologue to John’s Gospel, we are told of how God sends his word to us not just in words spoken and written, but now in the human person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Last Monday we heard the old, old story of the birth of Jesus from Luke. This morning we hear a theological reflection on that event. The theological word for this event is the Incarnation. The word “incarnation” means “enfleshment.” Carnal, carnage, and chili con carne are all cognates. God, who is spirit, enfleshes the divinity in a human body. This is more than the notion that every human being has a divine spark. The Christian claim is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God was fully present.

Theology is literally “god-talk.” So let’s talk about God. God is that being which created everything else. As such God must be transcendent. God is outside of time and space. God is outside of the universe. Consider artists. One might say that Van Gogh put himself into his painting, but no one would confuse the person Van Gogh with the canvas of *Starry Night*.

The claim of the Bible is that this transcendent God desires to be in a real relationship with the creation in general and with us human beings in particular. God loves us and wants us to love God back. However, we being creatures can never escape the universe. We are made of atoms and molecules and cells and cannot get outside the material universe. We cannot get outside to where the transcendent God is.

God has always desired to be in intimate, loving relationship with each of us. Relationships entail speaking to one another. So God tries to speak to us. The word of God is God’s attempt to establish and build this relationship with us. For centuries God inspired prophets to communicate with us. As the words of the prophets were recorded the writings or scriptures came into being. A few people seemed to have unusually close relationships with God through this invisible communication—Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Deborah, and so on. But most people hear the word of God at second or third hand. Finally, the self-expression of God, the message of God’s love, takes a different form. Instead using words, God becomes a human being. The Word of God becomes a human life. It is as if God said, “You are not getting what I am trying to say about love. Here, I going to show you what love is. Watch this.” And God proceeds to show us what God means by love by giving us Jesus.

This is an astounding and shocking claim. Jesus is not just a holy man but is in fact God. Jesus is not merely a prophet or teacher or even the best human being that ever lived; Jesus is God. This is the claim that sets Christianity apart from other religions. Other religions believe in God. Other religions call us to compassion and service. Other religions espouse peace and charity toward all. Other religions teach how to be in the right relationship with the rest of creation and with God. Only Christianity claims that God became a human being in one particular person at a particular time and place in history. God in his great love for us bridged the chasm between divinity and humanity, between transcendence and material existence.

The Incarnation goes way beyond how we understand Jesus of Nazareth. On this truth hangs a whole sacramental understanding of the universe. For if God enters God's own creation in Jesus of Nazareth, did God not also enter the creation in the actions of the Exodus, the words of the Law and the Prophets and the empowerment of David and Elisha? In fact the whole idea of sacraments is based on the idea that the spiritual and material worlds are not alien to one another but coincide. Every physical object and event has spiritual meaning and value. Every spiritual value and power has material expression. Every moment we can look at the things and occurrences in our lives and know that they are laden with the Spirit, with God. Everything is a sacrament. The entire universe is sacramental.

Anglican spirituality emphasizes this incarnational understanding. We have always seen the holy in ordinary things and ordinary lives. Cooking, gardening, manual labor, ordinary citizenship, are all filled with spiritual meaning and the presence of God.

We emphasize the divine in ordinary lives more than we demand perfections. We see holiness in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary.

Listen again to this Prologue to the Gospel of John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.* This word is the way God communicates. The Word is how the Creator reaches out beyond that transcendent state or place or realm that is outside our universe to cross the boundary into our universe. Just as we cross the gap between our mind and another's by speaking, so God extends Godself toward us by the Word.

The Word was in the world...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. God's purpose in entering this universe, in crossing over the boundary, was to bring us into the divine realm, the realm of true life giving relationship with God.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. Because we cannot get close to the transcendent God, God enters this world in Jesus so that God can be known.

This is the meaning of Christmas. This is why the baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem is important. Because this baby is how heaven and earth come together. This Word made Flesh is also our light and our life. This is the light that the darkness has not and can never extinguish. This is the light that is with us in the darkest of hours and in the darkest of places. This is the light that illumines the darkest parts of our own hearts. And this is the life that overcomes death. This is the life that we all, in our heart of hearts,

yearn for. This is the life that is so thick and strong and rich and free, that we call it eternal life. It is the Life God wants us to experience even now.

This is our Christmas gift from God. Love, Light, and Life. God wants us to receive this gift so that it will change us and make our lives full of joy and love. We receive this gift to be changed. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.” And still does.