

In the Flesh

John 1:1-18

Crossroads Christian Church

January 3, 2016 Christmas 2C

There's something beautiful, something mysterious, something compelling that draws us here to worship this time of year. Over the weeks of Advent, over our Christmas Sunday and Christmas Eve services, we have touched the beauty of the stories about the birth of Jesus, and experienced of how it happened. When we get to the beginning of the Gospel of John, we see a switch of emphasis. John focuses on the why of Christmas—the awesome mystery of God taking on flesh and dwelling among us. Theologically, it's called incarnation. God became a living, breathing, suffering, sweating, eating, drinking, working, playing human being. What an incredible thing that is! A few years back there was a pop song sung by Joan Osborne called "What if God was one of us?"; and John's reply is that God did become one of us. The God who knows the inner workings of the universe, the God who separated light from the darkness, the God who created life and created us, became one of us—in fact, God became a baby—a tiny, fragile, helpless, dependent, hungry little child.

God became one of us to allow us to become more like God. The abstract became concrete. The infinite one became finite. The free and powerful deity took on all the limitations of human flesh. The love of God came to us in a person—Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, the presence of God is something so awesome, so powerful, so terrifying, that even giants of faith like Moses and Isaiah cringe in fear, because they know that to see God could cause them to die. Yet in Jesus Christ we can see the gentle, loving, accepting face of God. The judgment of God became a good man hanging on a cross, judged by the self-righteousness of humanity, yet offering words of forgiveness. The power of God became the power of resurrection, and the power of one saying to his disciples, Lo, I am with you always. Because God came in Jesus Christ, our lives will never be the same. We have hope now. We have purpose now. We have power now. We have salvation now. We know what real love is now.

Through the power of that one who came born a baby in Bethlehem, our grubbing, miserable, self-centered existence has become authentic, joyous, love-filled living. The songs we have sung over the past month, the words of scripture we have heard over the past month, all bear witness. "Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." "Gloria in excelsis Deo." "God and sinners reconciled." "Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die." Behold a virgin

shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel—God is with us. Glory to God in the highest. And now we have John’s song. In the beginning was the word—and the word was with God, and the word was God.

John’s gospel begins with the same words as the book of Genesis—“In the beginning.” It takes us back to the moment of creation, when the Spirit of God brooded over chaos, and God’s word created the universe. Then the gospel writer makes a stirring, audacious claim. This word of God—God’s self expression—that created everything is the same Word that took on flesh and dwelled among us in a human—Jesus, the Christ. The Christ didn’t come into existence in Bethlehem, for the Christ—God’s Word was with God from the very beginning. God’s nature, God’s outreaching, creative love became flesh and bone, became a human being in Bethlehem. In this God-become-human, all God’s grace and truth was here in our midst. And we human beings, preoccupied with the small stuff, almost missed it entirely. God offered grace upon grace, John reminds us; love; presence; forgiveness; eternal life. Jesus was close to the Father’s heart, John reminds us—that means that God loved Jesus dearly, but it also means that the attitude, the personality, the mind, the love of Jesus was an accurate reflection of the attitude, the personality, the mind, the love of God. Why did God do this? Because God wanted us to be God’s children. “those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God’s children.” (John 1:12)

John goes on to say, “The Word became flesh and made his home among us.” The word became flesh means that God’s creative word became meat and muscle, skin and bone in a particular human being, Jesus Christ. “Made his home among us” Jesus didn’t just come to earth, reveal God, and swoop back up into the sky, he lived as we live. This earth, especially that piece of real estate near the Sea of Galilee, became his earthly address. Then John says, “We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) Maybe Charles Wesley was thinking of this passage when he wrote in the carol “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” these words: “Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!

Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity,
pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.”¹

¹ Charles Wesley, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” Chalice Hymnal 150.

God came to us in Jesus Christ to transform us so that we might become children of God; and as we learn how to be children of God, we can bring transformation to the world. Like candles in a dark room, we can shine. We can bring light and hope.

Clarence Matthews was a poor, humble, black chauffer in Alabama during the Great Depression. He sponsored a troop of boys in those tough days, and he was helping them to grow into men. He promised his boys a trip to Washington DC, to help them learn more about being Americans, and to see some of their own potential for greatness. They didn't have too much luck raising money for this field trip, but after 2 years of work, 43 boys set off in a rail coach to visit the capitol. They met George Washington Carver. They met the president of the U.S. They visited the Lincoln Memorial and other great shrines. Their faith in America was strengthened and reaffirmed. As a result of this trip, though, when Clarence Matthews was too old to continue working and had to retire, the boys, now men, discovered that the bank was about to foreclose on Clarence Matthews' house—it seems that years earlier, so they could go on that journey of a lifetime, Clarence had mortgaged his house to pay their way. His love for these boys took on flesh—it became sacrificial love. Now the men who had learned from him had the opportunity to extend some love and gratitude of their own, and they paid off the mortgage.²

That's just one story of love incarnate, one expression of what we celebrate today. You could probably tell stories of how somebody's sacrificial love helped make you the person you are today—parents, teachers, pastors, friends, organ donors, military personnel, police or fire fighters—but it all goes back to the sacrificial love of a God who laid glory aside and came to us as a tiny baby in Bethlehem.

God made love real by making love incarnate—and basically said, Go thou and do likewise. You let Jesus work within you. You give love flesh. You as a congregation and as individuals have done this in many ways during this Christmas season. Your offerings to the food bank, to the Society of St. Andrew, and to the deacon's fund are just some examples. Many of you have found other ways to reach out and help poor people—giving food, clothing, shelter, hope and encouragement. Many of you have invited friends, neighbors, and relatives to church, or even tried to explain to your own children or grandchildren what Christmas is all about.

² source unknown

God came into our midst as a tiny baby who would grow up to bring hope into a hopeless world; to bring light into a world of darkness. God became one of us. And God gave us the power to become children of God. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon