

The Word of God was made flesh and dwelt among us
Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, December 30, 2018
First Sunday of Christmas, (year C): John 1:1-18

John 1:1-18 (NRSV): In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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.

Some of you may be connoisseurs of fine art. Others may have just one painting or picture that captures your attention. Perhaps you have contemplated this painting for years, studied it and admired it, wondered why the artist composed it with the colors and strokes that were chosen. What if, after all those years of speculation you were to meet the artist? What if you learned to know the artist and understand how the artist thinks and paints? What if you could be in relationship with the artist and share in the creation of a new painting? What if *you* were the artwork and *God* were the artist?

My dad is here to visit from Michigan. It is wonderful to spend time with him, to speak with him at length. I get to hear more news and learn more about what is going on in his life. But my dad's visit is not good simply because I can learn more information about him. More importantly, his visit is good because we can share relationship with one another, and because I can continue to learn and grow in his presence. What if your *heavenly* father were to span the distance between the infinite and the ordinary to be in relationship with you? That is the mystery and the miracle of the incarnation—the blessing and celebration of Christmas.

I'm trying to capture in metaphors something unlike anything else there is. God is far more than a human father or a human artist. God is infinite and beyond description, the creator and sustainer of the universe, the one who knows our every molecule. And this God beyond description took flesh and dwelt among us.

Metaphors are the only language we can use for such a miracle. And the more abstract the metaphor, the more we call the conversation philosophy or theology. Theology is what we do when we stare at a sleeping baby in wonder at the miracle of life. Theology is what we do when we stare at the stars in the night sky and ponder our place in the universe. At Christmas, of course, we get to do both.

At Christmas, we start with the readings on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day from Luke about the birth of the baby Jesus. And on the first Sunday of Christmas this year, we hear from the Gospel According to John who goes long before the birth, way back to before the beginning of time. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being in him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

When John writes about God creating the world through the Word, he is using the Greek word “Logos.” Logos is Greek for “word.” Logos is the root of our English word “logic.” In Greek philosophy, Logos is also a technical term signifying the mind of God, the logic of God, the rational order of the creator, the active power of the voice of the Almighty. So when we hear that the Word was with God and the Word was God, and the Word took flesh and dwelt among us, we hear claims that describe Jesus in the terms of the Greek philosophy of the day.¹ Jesus is the Logos, Jesus is the Word—Jesus is the active, creative spoken voice of Almighty God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in human history.

To the Greeks, this idea of the Word becoming flesh was a radical idea. “Becoming flesh” is what the “incarnation” means. For the Greeks, the divine is eternal and unchanging and utterly distant from creation. The divine is pure and eternal, but creation is imperfect and deteriorates. The two can’t touch. From this Greek viewpoint, the universe does not care about our deterioration or our suffering.

Centuries later, the scientists and philosophers of the “enlightenment” period renewed this Greek outlook on nature. They looked for eternal truths, and as this worldview developed, many thought of God as merely a static power that set the laws of nature into motion. God became distant, if existent at all. Now, we see this attitude common in western culture. God is seen as either a distant and impersonal force, or a superstition for the emotionally weak.

But Christians believe differently. We believe that there is more to enlightenment than static principles or laws of nature. We believe that God entered human history and revealed himself to us. We believe that God cares about us—enough to experience our human life. We believe that in Jesus Christ, we can truly see God and have a clearer sense of who God is. No one has ever truly seen God, John writes, but we have seen Jesus, and in Jesus, God is made known to us. This is the mystery of the incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas.

There are many religious systems out there, some are conveniently simple, and some were created from mere ideas. These systems amount mostly to speculation—speculation about who God is based on the world around us and our own ideas. Like guessing about the artist by studying a painting, we do our best to make good guesses about God based on our observations. But Christianity claims that the artist came to us—God entered human history, taking flesh in Jesus to *show* us who he is. Ours is a revealed religion. We base our knowledge of God not on our speculation, but on God’s *self-revelation* to us. This cuts through the fallibility of our human guesswork. The incarnation is an amazing event in history—God has come to us.

¹ There were many philosophies in Greece; this line of thinking came from stoic philosophy, and from the Jewish philosopher Philo, and was connected to later “Neoplatonism.”

We not only learn more about who God is, but we are in relationship with God. We receive not only information, but we receive God himself. Jesus empowers us to be in relationship with God in a closer way than before. John writes “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” We are adopted as God’s children, becoming by adoption and grace who Jesus is by nature. And our heavenly father comes to us to know us and to be known by us.

Though we often need theology and philosophy to describe God, God is not a mere philosophical concept, a metaphor for eternal laws that form the backdrop for history. Our lives matter to God. Your life matters to God. Our joys matter to God, our tragedies matter to God. God cares about the small joys and subtle beauty and the minutia of our days. Through Jesus, we have the gift of God the Holy Spirit abiding with us, active in our lives, reaching out to us as we open ourselves to God in prayer and attention. God has broken into history to bring us not just eternal laws, but to know us personally and to be known by us personally.

God comes to us in Jesus Christ because he wants to be in relationship with us. He wants to heal our broken lives and give joy to our darkness and show us the paths of life and peace. If you have ever stared in awe and wonder at the face of a sleeping infant—if you have ever stared with awe and wonder at the stars on a clear summer night and pondered your place in the universe—just think that the hand that formed the universe knows and loves you! That is the mystery and the joy of the incarnation. That is the mystery of God with us. That is the mystery of Christmas!

When we come here to worship God, or when you say your prayers by yourself at home, know that the power who created the universe is eagerly listening for you. Seek out God’s presence, have faith in God’s power in your life.

For “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...Without him not one thing came into being...In him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”