

The Word Became Flesh

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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December 8, 2019
Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the

fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And 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.

¹⁵(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.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

One biblical commentary invites us to take the mysterious beauty of these words which open John's gospel with serious intent asking: "What does a preacher do with this poetry? Few things kill the impact of imagery like explanation, and yet we are tasked with standing in the pulpit and interpreting John's stunning prologue.

The word became flesh and lived among us.

How can such beauty be improved upon or dissected? The mystery these verses invoke overwhelms, no matter how often they are read. Grace and true light shine in the darkness. What preacher would ever claim to understand the miracle of the incarnation and the glory such embodiment brings close to us?"¹

The scholar's question addressed to preachers is a question for all of us, and for the text itself. I know that we have entered a season that cannot be explained. We need poetry and music and candlelight to help us experience the full majesty and the mystery of the Incarnation of God in our midst. Of Jesus Christ – fully human, fully God.

The last church I served in Columbia was the closest Presbyterian Church to the University of South Carolina, and we had an active campus ministry. The presbytery owned a building on the university campus, and our congregation had an Associate Pastor whose primary ministry was outreach to college students. The Student Center provided a space for gathering, a kitchen for home-cooked meals, a laundry room, a pool table. There were informal mid-week vesper services; church members carried in good food during exams; we had a van they used for excursions and mission trips.

Through the campus ministry, a number of college students affiliated with our congregation; some of them volunteered as youth

¹ Jill Duffield, *Connections: Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Year A, Vol. 1.

group advisors, a couple of them coached for our church league basketball teams for middle and high schoolers. One young man became a wonderful leader in our campus ministry program, and actually became pretty active in the church for a college student. About midway through his senior year he made an appointment to come see me. I had intuited that he was thinking about seminary and exploring a call to ministry.

Our conversation began with my thanking him for his involvement in the church; I told him how much we would miss him when he graduated and moved on, and then I waited for him to tell me what he wanted to talk about – presuming I’d soon be engaged in describing some of the differences between Princeton, Union and Columbia seminaries. We sat in silence for a restless moment, and then – seeming a little nervous – he finally said, “I’m having trouble with Jesus.” I am sure my knee jerk response went something like, “We all have trouble with Jesus...” But his was not a discipleship question so much as an existential one. It was the question any thinking person wonders about our Trinitarian theology – how can one God be revealed in three persons? How is God the Father separate from, but related to God the Son, and the Son to the Holy Spirit? But his real stumbling block was Jesus. A three-year-old has an amazing capacity to imagine God as a benevolent presence in the universe; but most young adults I know come to a point when they would echo my friend’s concern about “having trouble with Jesus.” God born among us, fully human *and* fully divine.

It is Advent’s hard theological question that I think gets pushed to the sidelines at this time of the year, because we’d rather enjoy the music and candlelight and evergreens and not think too deeply about what it all means. Truth be told, don’t all of us have trouble with Jesus? It’s nearly impossible to follow in his footsteps, to obey his commandments, to go where he seeks to lead us so far out of our comfort zones, and then also to understand how any one person could be fully human, fully God. The Incarnation is a mystery.

So it is no mystery to me that we have four gospel accounts and each one tells the story of Jesus somewhat differently. Not to mention the fact, that the church has spent hundreds of years trying to wrap theological words around the elusive presence of who Jesus is.

The gospels were written near the turn of the First Century, and it wasn't long after that when the Creedal affirmations of faith began to splinter the church over arguments about the revelation of God and the Incarnation of Jesus. The Apostles Creed reflects the theological formulations of the First and Second Centuries – and was likely born of an early church baptismal liturgy. By the 300's when Emperor Constantine won control of the Roman Empire, he sought to use one faith and one church to unify the empire. But by then the church was already fractured by theological disputes. The Eastern Orthodox Church never accepted the Apostles Creed as definitive as the Western church had. So Constantine had leading bishops convene the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 to develop a creed that would be accepted by the majority of church leaders in both the East and the West. To this day, the Nicene Creed is the most broadly used and ecumenical affirmation.

But I'm not sure the Nicene Creed would fully satisfy my young friend, the college student, and his question about Jesus: “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.” I could not have used those words in response to my young adult friend's declaration, “I'm having trouble with Jesus...” Oh, don't you see he was begotten, not made!

I sometimes think God created music because God knows that words are not enough to capture the beauty, the mystery, the awe-inspiring presence of the Incarnation of Jesus. Singing, “Of the Father's Love Begotten” is very different from explaining.

Most biblical scholars think the Prologue to John's gospel is actually the text of an early Christian hymn. These opening verses

poetically celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world, and introduce key theological themes that will be developed throughout the gospel. The gospel begins recalling the first words of Genesis, “In the beginning...” and announces the oneness between the God who spoke creation into being and the Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. This allusion to Genesis connects Jesus with God’s mighty acts and promises in the Old Testament. Through God’s Word, creation came into being. Through God’s word the Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai to give order to human community, and when human beings strayed from the Law – the word of the prophets proclaimed God’s truth and hope for our interdependence.

Then, according to John, that very same word became flesh in the person of Jesus. John’s gospel does not contain a birth narrative; rather, it focuses on bearing witness to who Jesus is: the eternal word of God becomes the historical Word made flesh. God’s glory and presence is now visible in Jesus Christ.

One of our denomination’s great and delightfully plainspoken theologians, Shirley Guthrie, described the Incarnation this way: “Whatever else they may mean, the birth stories of Jesus in Matthew and Luke emphasize the Christian belief that ‘God is with us’ is not just a beautiful idea or an abstract truth. It Happened! John also tells us that it happened when he says that the ‘Word became flesh and lived among us.’ We are not just talking about religious ideas and doctrines; we are talking about history. The stories of the birth of Jesus tell us that it is into the real world of flesh-and-blood human beings that God comes. The Christmas story is anything but the sentimental, harmless, once-a-year occasion for a “Christmas spirit” that lasts only a few days before we return to the ‘facts’ of the ‘real world.’ Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the kind of real world where we live all year long – a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy, and both the fear and the longing that things could be

different. John tells us that when Jesus comes – *the light shines in the darkness.*” Guthrie concluded: It is the same darkness in which we live.”²

Not long after the Nicene Creed formulated a theological understanding of who Jesus is, at the end of the Fourth Century Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius came along and was considered the greatest poet of his time. He wrote a poem about Christ, the Son of God, whose birth and saving ministry was coming to be understood as a fulfillment of ancient prophecies, much like the opening proclamation of John’s gospel. Interestingly, the original poem in Latin read: *Corde natus ex parentis*, which translates “Of the parent sole begotten,” using the word “parent” for God as a more inclusive term. Only later, was the translation changed to Father, giving the text a more traditionally masculine Trinitarian formulation that we hear in the hymn, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.”

The poet Marcus Prudentius lived from 348 to 413. He was one of the most prominent and prolific authors of Latin sacred poetry in its early days. He was born in a Roman province of northern Spain, and was a very well educated man. During his life he served as a lawyer, a judge, a civil servant for the government, and a scholar. When he was 57 years old, he retired from the world and withdrew to a monastery where he committed the rest of his life to prayer and writing for the church.³

Through his faith in Jesus and the discipline of writing poetry, Marcus Prudentius consciously chose a path of poverty, prayer and praise. Of all the carols we sing during Advent and Christmas, I am not sure there is a more beautiful proclamation of what we have come to understand about who Jesus is – than “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” As we sing it we will hear echoes of the opening verses of John’s gospel.

² Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, revised edition, p. 234-5.

³ LindaJo H. McKim, *Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, p. 220; etymologyofhymns.blogspot.com; general internet searches.

Like John's gospel, it may not offer explanation, but its poetry and music do uphold us with something even more revelatory about God's self-disclosure to the human family. Think about it:

*“By his Word was all created; he commanded; it was done:
heaven and earth and depths of ocean, universe of three in one...*

*... This is He whom seers in old time chanted of with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word.*

*Now he shines, the long-expected. Let creation praise it's Lord,
evermore and evermore.”*

You know, when it comes to Jesus, the church really does not talk about explanation. The word we use is proclamation – we announce the coming of Jesus Christ. So, now, let the church praise our Lord singing our proclamation.

Amen.