

The Word Made Flesh

The Rev. Pamela L. Foster
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Christmas I
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The Gospel passage we hear this morning is about the holy mystery of the Word made flesh. By their nature holy mysteries defy explanation. Yet they convey to those who will receive them a profound sense of the magnitude of God's tender mercy and almost unimaginable devotion toward us. Rather than attempting to explain the inexplicable, I offer you 4 perspectives on the holy mystery of the Incarnation, Word becoming flesh. The first is about reverence for it. The second provides an analogy for us as to what God is up to in the Incarnation. The third provides an illustration of a key phrase of the Gospel, "the power to become children of God." And the last brings us, I hope, face to face with Jesus, who has seen God.

Let me offer a clue to the mystery before I start. That word, "Word," is intended to remind us of how God went about establishing Creation "in the beginning." Remember that in Genesis, God speaks the Creation into being. So the Word made flesh is God's power of creating become human. The Greek word is "logos" which can mean both mind and heart. So, Word made flesh is also the mind and heart of God. God's creating power in mind and heart is embodied, then, in Jesus.

Reverence for the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word of God made flesh. Harold Lewis, Rector of Calvary Church, Pittsburgh wrote his Christmas message to that congregation on the gospel passage we have read this morning. As a youth, Lewis attended St. Philip's Church, Brooklyn, where the following ritual took place at the conclusion of each service:

After the final blessing but before the final hymn of any given service, the priest and three acolytes processed to the horn or north end of the altar. Two of the acolytes were torch bearers who stood on either side of the third acolyte. This third acolyte held a framed card on which the Prologue to the Gospel of John was printed. The priest read the prologue in a low voice, barely audible. And when he came to, "... and the Word was made flesh" (or, as it was read in Latin — Et verbum caro factum est), the three acolytes plus priest all genuflected as an outward and visible sign of reverence for the mystery of the Incarnation.

Body prayer!

The entire Gospel of John is in a real sense about the mystery of the Incarnation, and this prologue functions the way an overture to an orchestral composition does, introducing the major themes that will appear in the Gospel.

Lewis notes that the practice of “The Last Gospel” — as it was called — has since “fallen into desuetude” and though that be the case, I thought I would tell you about it, because it illustrates the absolute and utter centrality of the Incarnation in the Christian faith. It’s what we are all about. No matter what gospel text was appointed for a given day, whether it be a reading from Matthew, Mark, Luke or some other passage in John, the text we have heard today was always read at the conclusion of every service as an act of reverence for the centrality to us of the mystery of the Incarnation. Word of God made flesh!!! As I said, reverence acted out for this holy mystery.

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An Analogy for us to the Mystery of the Incarnation. Many years ago I served that same parish as a member of the clergy staff. During my time there, we undertook a massive restoration project — not renovation — restoration. A large cast of architects and artisans labored within those walls for a good long time, among them a team of woodcarvers practicing their artistry. One young member of the team was usually eager to talk about what he was doing. One day he was carving finials for the pulpit and lectern, little crosses, which — over the years — had broken off and been lost. I asked him what was the technical term for this intricate work. He replied, “Whittling.” And then, as he “whittled” these intricate and delicate pieces, he mused aloud on the meaning of the word, “restoration.”

In a restoration, he explained, even when one is carving something new, one tries to use material from the building, rather than introducing new material. So, for instance, the crosses he was fashioning that day were taking shape in wood remaining from the reconfiguration of the choir stalls. In a restoration one uses what was there already to fashion what is needed now. The point is that the new should arise from what was already there. What was already there has been transformed into what is needed now.

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O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully *restored*, the dignity of human nature ...

begins one of our prayers for the Christmas season. What God has done, the Gospel of John declares, in making Word flesh is to carve from what has always been something new in order to restore to us our original God-given dignity.

An Illustration of the Phrase, “power to become Children of God.” In his message to the present congregation of Calvary, Harold Lewis makes the essential point that in the Word made flesh, God takes on not only actual flesh but also and most importantly the

human condition. And I want to emphasize that to you this morning. It is not “bodiness” alone that we are dealing with when we speak of Word made flesh. In Word made flesh God declares there is no squalor, no evil, no societal ill, no violence, no despair, no darkness — to use the term John uses — no darkness, personal or collective, that can extinguish the light of Word made flesh, the light of Jesus Christ. And there is no squalor, no evil, no societal ill, no violence, no despair, no darkness, personal or collective that cannot be reached by the redeeming, reconciling power, the light, of Word made flesh. One of my brothers teaches a distance learning college course in World Religions to people in the U.S. military serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. One of his Christian students wrote this:

I have been a soldier for 16 years. I deployed to this war zone with [here he names his division] in March. During that time, I have had plenty of opportunities to reflect.... My religion now revolves around what we were taught as children. ... I am trying to love strangers as I do my family and have found that, in doing so, some of those strangers have become my family.

And Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

From a war zone this soldier writes of the bonds of love that can unite human beings with one another, even in the darkness of war, the light that will not be extinguished, the common identity that is ours as children of God because of the mystery of the Incarnation. The love of God, embodied in Jesus Christ makes bonds of love, such as those this soldier experiences, possible among all people. The mystery of the Incarnation can redeem any situation, anyone and everyone and give us all power to become children of God. That is the claim John the Evangelist makes, and the claim at the heart of our life.

Coming Face to Face With Jesus. In Chapter 33 of Exodus one can read that Moses pitched a tent in the wilderness. The tent was known as the Tent of Meeting. It was outside the camp of the people who were wandering there in the wilderness. They wandered while God fashioned them into a people for God, doing his divine whittling to bring them into existence out of a rag-tag bunch of former slaves. And, the text reads, “... the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” Not that Moses could see God, mind you, for no one was to see God. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God declared God would show Moses all God’s goodness, but not God’s “face,” for no one has seen God and lived.

But now ... now one who has seen God face to face, the very Word of God who was with God from before the beginning. The creative power of the mind and heart of God. The very love and mercy of God have become one with us. He is not wearing a costume made out of humanity. He has come to dwell not only among us, but in us. He is one of us. The French composer, Messian, wrote, “The Word became flesh and dwelt in me.”

That is the breathtaking truth that we celebrate each Christmas. That is what God has done for us. The hope is that we will reverently acknowledge God's work by the way we dwell with one another and others. The hope is we can remember gratefully each day that God has restored dignity to all humanity, for that will surely affect the way we dwell in God's world. The hope is that the phrase, "power to become children of God," will take root in us as it has in the soldier. The hope is we will permit the face of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, the glory of Jesus to carry out in us the transforming purposes for which he came to earth, for which he abides with us still. Then will we be full of grace and truth as is he. Amen.