

The Second Baptist Pulpit

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 1:1-18

January 4, 2009

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There's no manger scene here in the Gospel of John—no shepherds, no star, no angels, no Mary and Joseph, no Bethlehem, no “no vacancy” in the inn. Just the straightforward and incredible announcement that God has become flesh.

In the play *Green Pastures*, which ran for many years on Broadway, playwright Marc Connelly has a memorable scene. The Lord is anxiously looking out over the parapets of heaven, trying to decide what to

do with the sinful situation on earth.

Gabriel enters with his horn tucked under his arm. Sensing the Lord's dilemma, he brushes his lips across the trumpet to keep the feel of it and asks, *Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?*

No, no, said the Lord, *don't touch the trumpet, not yet*. God continues to worry with the problem.

Gabriel asks the Lord again what he plans to do. Will he send someone to tend to the situation? Who will it be? Gabriel makes some suggestions. *How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?*

Without looking back at Gabriel, God says, *I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!*
[Thomas Lane Butts, "A Permanent Glimpse of God," *January 4, 2009, Day1.net*]

And the Word became flesh.

John introduces the concept of the logos. John's Gospel begins: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* The word that we translate "Word" is the Greek word "logos." Logos was not just a word. It was and is a philosophical concept.

Logos has much meaning in Jewish and Hellenistic thought. In Jewish thought, the word was used to describe the creative power of God at work in the world—the creation of the world occurred by the word of God.

In Greek philosophy, the logos was thought to be the all-pervading principle by which the world was created and sustained.

Here's the remarkable thing that John is saying to us today (v. 14): *The logos became flesh and dwelled among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.* That's John's version of the Christmas story.

Do you get the power of that statement? That abstract principle of "logos"... became flesh. That abstract idea of God's creative and sustaining powers became concrete, flesh, actually. That abstract concept of "God" that exists in our minds became flesh.

The fact that God became flesh carries with it two crucial implications for us. One is that because God became flesh, we have a better understanding of God.

Because of God becoming flesh in Jesus, we come to an understanding of the nature of God that exceeds any previous understanding. In Jesus, we are able to see all of God we need to see. To know what God is like, we look at Jesus.

When all we have are theologi-

cal abstractions, abstract ideas, we tend to create our own concrete images. Throughout history, these images have sometimes generated descriptions of God that are less than divine, and sometimes even less than human.

In Christ there is opened to us a whole new enlightened understanding of God. It is difficult for those of us who have inherited 2000 years of theological explanation of the Incarnation to realize what an incredibly joyful surprise it must have been for the first disciples of Jesus to hear him say: *He who has seen me has seen the Father.* (John 14:9b)

No longer is God a disembodied voice from some distant place. The Incarnation gives us the wonderful insight that not only is Jesus like God, but *God is like Jesus* and always has been.

I remember when I was in seminary I was having to write a paper on some of the most troubling and barbaric passages in the Old Testament—those descriptions of holy war, places where the Bible says things like God ordered his people to kill all the women and children who were in their way and wipeout whole villages.

And in studying how to understand some of those savage and cruel actions that are attributed there to God's will, I came across the idea of "progressive revelation." Progressive revelation refers to our incomplete but growing understanding over the centuries of God and God's character. It's the idea that as we move throughout the Bible, God reveals more and more of himself so that our understanding of God progresses and unfolds over time.

In his Daily Study Bible Series on the Gospel of John, Dr. William Barclay tells of a little girl who when she was confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament felt called upon to offer some explanation in defense of God. She said: *That happened before God became a Christian.*

[Barclay, William, *Daily Study Series, The Gospel of John, Vol. 1, pg 16, Westminster Press, 1956 as cited by Thomas Lane Butts*]

In John's portrayal of Jesus here, he is telling us that God was always like Jesus, but we never fully realized that until Jesus came.

But now, because we know Jesus, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus' compassion, we know that's what

God is like. When we see Jesus' love, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus pay special attention to children, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus touch the leper, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus step in and stop the religious people from stoning the woman caught in adultery, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus heal the sick and the broken, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus have no patience for religious displays just for show, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus make it a point to reach out to the outcast, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus look past what's on the outside of a person and see what's in the heart, we know that's what God is like.

When we see Jesus challenge people to give up everything to follow him, we know that's what God is like.

When we see Jesus' forgiveness, we know that's what God is like. When we see Jesus' anger at those who used God's temple to enrich themselves and cheat the people who came there, Jesus' anger at the religious hucksters and frauds, we know that's what God is like. When we hear Jesus tell stories like "The Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son," we know

that's what God is like. When we see Jesus with power to calm the storm, we know that's what God is like.

And when we see people say things and do things in the name of God, but it is not consistent with what we know Jesus to have said or done, then we know that is *not* what God is like.

The Incarnation gives us the wonderful insight that not only is Jesus like God, but *God is like Jesus* and always has been.

So one of the crucial implications of God becoming flesh is that we have a better understanding of God. The other important implication is that because God became flesh, God has a better understanding of us—or at least we have a better appreciation of God's understanding of us. God, in Christ, has identified with us. God is no longer remote but close.

You know how people who have shared the same experience have a kind of bond with each other that makes them feel that they do understand, and they can share with each other.

I once heard an older pastor tell how when he was a very young minister and had not yet himself been initiated into the fraternity

of grief, he was called once to minister to an old farm widow. Her husband had just died, and the young minister went with all his earnest intent to be as much comfort as he could to her, but he had never lost a significant person in his life.

His knowledge of grief was abstract and academic, and so he went and said the best words he knew to say. He tried to convey his care, but while he was doing that, there came into the room where they were another older woman about this widow's age. She walked across and without hardly a word, she embraced the grieving person and all she said was, *I understand, my dear. I understand.*

Someone told him later that this second person had just lost her husband six months before and, therefore, she came out of a shared understanding of what the new widow was experiencing. And you could almost see the bridges of understanding coming to exist between them. That woman who had shared the same experience had a way of connecting, had a way of making clear that she understood, that the young minister was not able to because he had not walked in her shoes.

[thanks to John Claypool for this illustration and for the following account of the play by Guenter Rutenborn in "God

Became What We Are", "30 Good Minutes," Chicago Sunday Evening Club, first air date December 24, 1994]

If God, in fact, has come to this earth to live as we live, if God has experienced life the way we experience it, if God has become flesh, then it means that we can believe that God understands, that none of our experiences are strange to God, because God has chosen to share the human condition with us. There is no longer a remote sense that God is above and outside us, but there is this incredible sense that God understands from within what it's like to be a human being, to struggle as we have to struggle, and so can give us grace to help in our times of trouble.

There is a powerful expression of this particular aspect of Christmas in a play that was written by a German Lutheran minister. His name was Guenter Rutenborn.

The play was written in 1945 as Germany was reeling from the impact of the terrible World War II, and the Pastor Rutenborn is trying to struggle with the question that was on so many people's minds back in that day, namely, who was responsible for the terrible agony

that the world had experienced through World War II.

And so the play begins with a group of refugees, displaced persons, milling around, asking who's to blame, and the various answers that were in the air were voiced there.

Some said Hitler was to blame; others said, *No, it was the munitions manufacturers who financed him.*

Others said it was the apathy of the German people, but then suddenly a man comes up out of the crowd and says, *Do you want to know who is really to blame for all the suffering we've been through? I'll tell you. God is to blame. He is the one that created this world. He is the one who has let it be what it is.*

And everybody catches up the chorus. They turn with one voice to say, *God is to blame. God is to blame.*

And so in the play, God is brought down on the stage and is put in the dock, and God is tried for the crime of creation. He is found guilty and the judge says, *The crime is so severe that there is going to have to be the worst of all sentences. I hereby sentence God to have to live on this earth as a human being.* And the three archangels are

given the task of carrying out the sentence.

The first archangel walks to the end of the stage and says, *I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to be obscure and to be poor. He will be borne on the backside of nowhere with a peasant girl for his mother. There will be a suspicion of shame about his birth, and he will have to live as a Jew in a Jew-hating world.*

The second archangel starts out and says, *I'm going to see to it when God serves his sentence that he knows what it's like to fail and to suffer disappointment. No one will ever understand what he is trying to do.*

The third archangel says, *I'm going to see to it when God serves his sentence that he knows what it's like to suffer. I'm going to see to it that he has all kinds of physical pain. At the end of his life, he's going to be executed in absolutely as painful a way as possible.*

And with that the three archangels disappear. The lights go down, and it suddenly dawns on you that God has already served that sentence.

He knows what it's like to live as a human being, knows

what it's like to struggle, to suffer, which means there's nothing you face today that is going to be strange to God, nothing that you face that God can't identify with.

The great message of Christmas is that God became what we are, so that we could understand better who God is, and we could believe with all our hearts that God understands who we are, and this is surely good news.

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