

## “The Word Made Flesh”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork

Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – December 25, 2022 – Christmas Day

Lesson: John 1:1-14

Creator God, as we continue the celebration of Christ’s birth in our midst on this glorious Christmas Day, may we find hope renewed, peace reborn, joy rekindled, and love revitalized in our hearts, our lives, our communities, and our world. Amen.

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The Gospel According to John contains no stories of angels and shepherds like Luke, no shining star and Magi from the East like Matthew. Instead, John begins with the story of the Word becoming flesh and the Light shining into the darkness.

The Word of God (the *logos* in Greek) was there from the beginning, says John. The Word was central, the primary agent of creation. John proclaims that all things came into being through the Word. Life itself was birthed through the Word.

When we think back to the story of creation found in the first chapter of Genesis, this rings true – God speaks all life into being – let there be light, let there be water and earth, and living things to fill them.

New Testament Scholar, John Dominic Crossan, calls the *logos* the intelligibility of the universe. We might also say that the Logos is the Wisdom of the universe because the Word and Wisdom of God have shared a close theological and linguistic relationship over the centuries.

And Christmas for John is that the Word, the Wisdom of God, present since the dawn of time, the dawn of creation, has now become flesh in a particular way in the person of Jesus, has lived among us, and showed us what God looks like and acts like in the flesh. And, in Jesus, the Light of God has shone into this world, even into its darkest places, but nothing and no one succeeded in extinguishing the Light (even though some tried and some continue to try). But nevertheless, the Light shone on then and shines on still.

If it all sounds a bit mystical, it is. John uses these poetic metaphors of the Word and the Light to give us some images to hold onto as he seeks to help his readers grasp the good news of God’s radical incarnate presence in our ordinary world. John’s happy to write about it, I think. But, really, he wants us to experience it first-hand.

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse fourteen in *The Message* version of the Bible. He says, “the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

God’s moved into the neighborhood. Jesus might very well live next door. This is the good news of incarnation. If we take this idea seriously, what does this mean for our neighborhood? What does this ask of us as neighbors?

Theologian Sallie McFague takes the idea of incarnation even further and proclaims that indeed all the world, all creation itself, is God's Body. If we take this idea seriously, how does that shape how we treat God's Body – this interconnected, living, breathing, created and still creating world that not only belongs to God, but actually embodies God, is home to God. In our ordinary world, flesh, bone, and blood, water, soil, and air are imbued with God's Spirit.

These proclamations of incarnation certainly call us to think beyond our individual selves, to assess our own desires and ambitions, and sometimes set them aside when necessary in order to preserve, protect, and help other parts, other members, of God's Body prosper and thrive. If the world is God's Body, then all the world, especially the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the oppressed, must be given the opportunity to embody God's presence and flourish. And the systems we humans have created that damage, separate, divide, deny our interconnectedness and dependence upon one another must be dismantled.

Christmas is the celebration of this good news of the radical incarnation of God-with-us. And it is "good news of great joy," as the angel proclaimed to the shepherds in Luke. In all of the Christmas stories we find God not off in a distant heavenly realm, but here with us – in our neighborhood – in a manger (a feed trough) in the company of animals, in a simple human family, adored and visited by all manner of folks including local shepherds and wise ones from other neighborhoods.

Part of the Christmas message is that we don't need to go anywhere else to find God because God has instead claimed this place, our neighborhood, our lives, our world, as special, as the place where God belongs, as home.

And that is a risky move for God. With incarnation comes vulnerability and reliance on the receptivity of this world.

And if we claim this faith in an incarnate God as our own, that comes with some risk for us too because Christmas is only part of the story of incarnation.

Forgive me for skipping way ahead to the end of John's gospel. But do you remember what happens on Easter evening? When the Risen Christ returns to the disciples with a message of hope and peace... he breathes on them. He gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John proclaims that the incarnate presence of God lives on beyond the earthly life of Jesus, in all who take seriously the gift of the Holy Spirit that we have been given. The story of incarnation began with creation, continued with Jesus, and is still being written in us and in our world.

God is still with us – God's Word and Light have moved in and taken up residence in our lives, says John. So, how might this shape us this year? How does this good news of incarnation inspire our lives – not only at Christmas, but all year long?

Can it make us a little braver in the ways we seek to embody God's love in our neighborhood?

Can it give us a little more energy and willingness to tackle the tough stuff in our world with love?

Can it bring us joy even when we must deal with difficult experiences?

Can it give us the hope we need to carry on, can it bring peace to sustain us?

I think those are some of the things John hoped for. I think those are some of the things followers of Jesus have found throughout the centuries in this message of the good news of God-with-us.

But, as LeVar Burton used to say on *Reading Rainbow*, “you don’t have to take my word for it.” So, I’d like to share a few thoughts from a few other folks on the impact of incarnation on our lives.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

*It was God-With-Us. Not the God-Up-There somewhere who answers our prayers by lifting us out of our lives, but the God who comes to us in the midst of them – however far from home we are, however less than ideal our circumstances, however much or little our lives reflect the Christmas cards we send. That is where God is born, just there, in any cradle we will offer (him), on any pile of straw we will pat together with our hands.*

*Any of us who have prayed to be transported into God’s presence this Christmas will get our wish – only not, perhaps, in the way we had thought. None of heaven’s escalators are going up (tonight/today). Everybody up there is coming down (tonight/today), right here, right into our own Bethlehem, bringing us the God who has decided to make his home in our arms.*

(excerpt from *Past Perfection*, from *Home By Another Way*, p. 24, Cowley Publications, 1999)

Franciscan Friar, Father Richard Rohr writes:

*The Incarnation is not only “God becoming Jesus.” It is a much broader event, which is why John first describes God’s presence in the general word “flesh” (John 1:14). John is speaking of the ubiquitous Christ [the Universal Christ] we continue to encounter in other human beings, a mountain, a blade of grass, or a starling.*

(Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, Center for Action and Contemplation, Inc., 2019)

And finally, since Christmas Day is a great time to read a story, I have one to share with you. It’s a children’s book, but it’s good for children of all ages. And though it wasn’t necessarily written to be a Christmas story, I think you’ll see why I think it is.

Read: *Where Does God Live?* By Holly Bea

Hope finds God everywhere and in everything. That’s not only the moral of this story, but a true testimony to the incarnate presence of God. Merry Christmas! Amen.

**Benediction: “The Work of Christmas”**

As we now depart worship to continue the celebration of Christmas and to serve with love and faith, hear these words of blessing and call to action by the great African-American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.*