

“From Word to Flesh”

Sermon from John 1:1-14

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light - a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

Then one came named John, sent as an envoy from God, who came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through his testimony everyone might believe. He himself wasn't the Light; he only came to testify about the Light - the true Light that illumines all humankind.

The Word was coming into the world - was in the world - and though the world was made through the Word, the world didn't recognize it. Though the Word came to its own realm, the Word's own people didn't accept it. Yet any who did accept the Word, who believed in that Name, were empowered to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor urge of flesh, nor human will - but born of God. And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us; we saw the Word's glory - the favor and position a parent gives an only child - filled with grace, filled with truth.

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Just last month my parents recreated their first date: dinner at Gianni's pizza in Monterey. They traveled to California from their home in Kansas, not only for this reason, but they decided to stop at the little pizza shop while they were out this direction. When they first shared a meal there, in 1976, it had just been open two years - an old Foster's Freeze an Italian family had converted - over the years, four generations of that family have kept it open and feeding people.

Their first dinner there wasn't fabulous. My mom had said she liked cheese so my dad ordered just a cheese pizza, extra cheese, and they both remember it came gooey, dripping with a layer of cheese maybe an inch thick. They didn't go back because it was great pizza. They went back - well, the way you can go back these days - they picked up an order to go, from that same place, not for the taste, but for the memory. It was the first meal they'd shared together, the first day they'd actually seen each other.

My parents were pen pals, set up by mutual friends. My dad was in the Air Force, at the language school in Monterey, while my mom was in nursing school in Michigan. They traded letters for about a year before she went out to meet him. He proposed the same weekend of that pizza date, on the beach at Carmel.

They had fallen in love through their letters. They knew each other. In their writing, they had cared for and supported each other, shared their hopes and dreams with each other. And then they met - then their words became flesh - and so their relationship became something new.

This beginning of John, that we read for today, tells us that long ago, God made this same choice. The God who is the creativity of the universe, the God our stories say spoke the world into being, and then kept not leaving it alone, kept seeking out friends, kept making promises, kept delighting in or mourning over all that was happening - that God, says the Message rendering of these verses, “moved into the neighborhood. The version we read for today says that God came and “stayed for a little while among us,” almost like an artist-in-residence. A literal translation of the verb used here is “to tent.” “God pitched a tent here with us.” Commentator Karoline Lewis points out that this is more than just a location change, based on the ways folks had been thinking about who and what the divine might be. According to this story, God doesn’t just *go where we go*, here, God is *who we are*.

Do you ever wonder what the motivating impulse might have been there? What’s the draw of these bodies? I think of a baby, kicking his feet out, getting a sense of how far his legs go, how they connect with, or just flail around in, the world he’s just

been born into. I think of an infant will just look at her fingers, learning how they work, how she'll put her toes in her mouth.

Do you still do that, ever? Not your toes in your mouth, maybe, but do you ever wonder: What is this flesh? Like, are you watching the Olympics? Are you outside at all these days, hiking, biking, kayaking? Are you aging? Are you singing? Are you in pain? This flesh is gift and limitation, joy and despair, is it not? Our experience is all wrapped up in these bodies. And there is a point in the story of our faith where we say, God fundamentally shifts God's own way of being, and chooses to live in the world in a new way - to take on the wonder and the restraint of it all. To visit this world that began as words - words that took on color and shape and texture and depth and complexity, in new and different ways as the ages passed - to visit and to dwell in flesh, within it, among us. To fall in love with it, maybe, in a new way.

John Allen invites us to think about the specificity of this story: not just God entering time, not just a grand cosmic vision of an unfolding history, but a spatial reality. He leans on native spirituality to draw out the importance of locatedness, saying: God came to live in Galilee, a specific place with its own landscape, and its own people. Not that God inserted God's own self in a timeline, to intervene and change the course of history and set things right, but God came to be with and among, to live in a specific moment and community. That

invites us to recognize the importance of our own embodied locatedness. Allen names this God's "incarnational intention," and he says there are a few ways it's expressed:

God's incarnational intention is that God's story gets lived out in recognizable ways in the world. Not only over some grand cosmic saga, he says, but also in the way we engage the specific broken places in our communities and even in the forgettable interactions we have with one another.

And God's incarnational intention is that God's presence becomes unmistakable in our midst because we have put our bodies, not just our language, into action for what we believe to be true.

God's incarnational intention is that the hope, the love, the justice, the peace that we sing about and pray for takes on flesh through each of us. That we embody all of it, or whatever of that it is that our particular bodies and minds and contexts can, by showing up in the world we have, as the people we are, to make God into flesh once again.

Every morning at Vacation Bible School this week started the same: the kids ran down into the Social Hall, they each found a mat with a song sheet and a box of crayons and a picture to color, and as they settled in, Sean strummed his guitar a few times, and then welcomed them to the week and asked them

what the big word is that they were focusing on for the week. Anybody here from that? Anybody remember the big word?

Lovingkindness.

And since I've been thinking about this scripture, I've been wondering, too, all week: how do we make that word flesh? How do we give that word arms and legs, hands and feet? How do we get that word around town? We just heard lots of suggestions for this, right - like inviting Jesse over to vacuum? Maybe you saw the cards pasted to the window on your way in...

It may sound too simplistic, but I think the story of the incarnation is telling us that God takes on flesh so God can know us more and love us better. So I'm left wondering this week how those abstract concepts, like knowledge and love, might be embodied in and through each of our lives.

Does God's wisdom live in you when you teach your grandson how to throw a ball, or carve a top? Does God's grace live in you when you sit patiently with a neighbor who's telling a story you've already heard, when you forgive yourself for a fault that's long haunted you? Does God's justice live in you when you raise your voice against a system that values profits over people, when you say you won't participate in that way of the world anymore? Does God's creativity live in you any time

you translate your ideas into action, any time you take a word, and make it flesh? Does it live in us any time we, as a congregation, as a community, do that together - making cards or making sandwiches or making prayer shawls or making shelter or making friends?

I wonder if God's creativity, God's embodiment, above all else, is an invitation to our own, so that we might know ourselves and each other more, so that we might love ourselves, and each other, and all the world, with our whole, full being. I think this story tells us that that's who God loves - our whole, full selves - that's who God invites to be part of this glorious, painful, beloved kingdom. May it be so.