

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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The Word Became Flesh

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The very foundation of our faith professes God chose to wear our skin. How we take for granted our skin. Touch your hand. Maybe touch the hand of the person next to you.

Imagine God wanting to do this so much that God empties out of the heavens and eternity to inhabit our flesh. The humanity of Jesus is no mere costume, it is the miracle of Christmas.

It is the truth we stake our lives on: “the word became flesh and lived among us.” The more we lean into God loving us and living with us, we open our eyes to the miracles that exists in the space between each of us.

Since the notion of incarnation may be so obtuse, the stories from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew bring this closer to home. Both gospels tell of a strong, teenage girl who says “yes” to God. And a young man just trying to do the right thing for her and their future.

They struggle beneath an oppressive government whose greedy taxation sends them to unavoidable homelessness. Later they flee as immigrants when their homeland becomes deadly.

It’s a miracle anyone will bear children into such a world of hardship, and yet it is repeated in our city and at the borders.

Mary and Joseph's story invites us to believe God appears among the least likely people and situations.

This weekend, no one can claim that for God to enter the fray of human life is too ethereal in a city that borrows from this Christmas story the word "immaculate" to celebrate an improbable reception and the birth of a championship team.

Tonight, we nod to Franco Harris and the greatest play in football made in his unlikely encounter, by doing what he did best, which still gives us hope.

The Gospel of John also tells stories of Jesus entering the messy fray of life, but this writer's story places the incarnation on an entirely different plane.

Before I read, please pray with me.

Dear God, on this holiest of nights, with words and ideas so far-fetched from a time long ago, help us believe. Silence in us any voice but yours. Through these words of scripture, bring us to recognize your presence in our daily lives and with each other. Help us be a part of this miracle called life. Amen.

John 1:1-5, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from God, full of grace and truth.

In the beginning of John's gospel are not our wishes, hopes, dreams, and plans. In the beginning are not our impoverished and broken lives. In the beginning is God's plan.

This gospel harkens back to the genesis of all time when God spoke creation into being. The gospel writer chose the Greek "logos." God's word. Instead of using the word, "word," we could also translate this as "in the beginning was the logic, blueprint, the formula, the nuclear fusion reaction, the cosmic design," or any other way we glimpse into God's grand imagination.

God conceived of Jesus not at some later moment as an idea to save us, he exists as God's intention all along.

The incarnation of Jesus, his living, dying, and rising, reveals to us the depth of God's love for our lives that we could not otherwise know.

If we pay attention, Christ's heart continues to beat in the sacraments. When we look at the world in wonder of what God does we feel his heart in buying groceries, daily kisses, saying goodbye, and in the space between the notes of music.

We live an incarnational life with God the moment we can look in the face of a stranger, particularly one the world considers unworthy of notice, and see God. It is why we aim to live as Jesus teaches, not just by thinking or praying about it, but by doing it, wanting to be his hands and feet.

God sets the world free for love to flourish. We can as well, by starting somewhere, somehow. It doesn't need to be a grand gesture, show stopping shock and awe. A wee gesture will do.

Here's a story of one man's gift to me.

A few years ago on Thanksgiving weekend, I stopped by Whole Foods, ostensibly for the week's groceries. Honestly, I needed to escape from my struggle writing about Isaiah's prophecy of our messiah appearing as a wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, etc.

Since it was early, the few checkout lines that were open moved slowly. Trying to make the best of my time, I reached for my phone only to realize I'd left it at home. Now I really became impatient with myself. I couldn't fuss with the phone nor use the Whole Foods app for my additional 10% discount. How silly to think of bargain shopping at Whole Foods.

When I started to unload my groceries, I admitted to the check-out guy I'd forgotten my phone with the app. He smiled broadly saying, "They call me 'Mr. Wonderful.' I can offer you the price adjustment." This gesture alone made up for the slow pace.

Mr. Wonderful truly had an infectious smile. He was of a slight build and from the hearing devices that were visible, his unusually shaped ears, and slight speech impediment, I realized how he needed to work to communicate.

As I turned to bag my groceries, he asked, “What book has transformed your life?”

This was Whole Foods on a Saturday morning not a university or indie bookstore.

His eye contact told me he’d wait for an honest answer.

I felt a huge risk. I don’t wear my collar outside of church or remove the book jacket from any theology text on an airplane. I hope to live my faith, but not broadcast it. So I surprised myself when I said, “Holy Scripture has and continues to change my life.”

He paused before responding, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” His favorite book is The Gospel of John and its ethereal incarnation.

“But then again,” he said, “I love Moses’ psalm...Psalm 90,” and he paused to see if I would engage.

I decided to lob it back. “‘Our God Our Help in Ages Past,’ is one of my favorite hymns.” He hummed the first line of this hymn, based on Ps 90, and it was as if we both scored.

Mr Wonderful resumed, “oh – the poetry of Song of Songs – what a gift.” Then he laughed, wondering about the prophets, “Who does Jonah think he is, arguing with God?”

Our banter went on while he was scanning, and I was bagging the groceries with intermittent questions if the cauliflower was organic or conventional.

Once we were done, as he handed me the register tape, he said, “The most profound book of all is the prophecy of Isaiah, ‘unto us a child is born.’” His voice seemed to crescendo to “and they shall call him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.”

I was speechless. Just that very morning, I wondered how such ancient words would ever ring true. I could get so caught up in trying to explain God that I forget just how easy it is to experience God when another person stands right in front of me.

Here is what I learned: God will continue to transform me by Holy Scripture when I am willing to let my guard down, and truly connect. I felt washed with a grace that morning. What happens when I get out of the way, and imagine God living in the space between us?

Here is my prayer: I pray I will try this, and I pray you too may be willing to be fully present with another in whatever way that person needs or wants.

The savior we receive is not someone to fix us but someone to reveal to us ourselves. The gift of God in human flesh is not a grim course correction, but a mirror, a gaze, a joyous recognition, of the beauty and shining love in which we were conceived.

Never underestimate the way God nudges us to believe God is here among us.



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