

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE WORD BECAME FLESH

John 1:14-18

Listen to these verses again, this time from *The Message* paraphrase:

“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.

“John pointed Him out and called: ‘This is the One!
The One I told you was coming after me
but in fact was ahead of me.
He has always been ahead of me,
has always had the first word.’

“We all live off His generous bounty,
gift after gift after gift.
We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving,
this endless knowing and understanding –
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.
No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.
This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made Him plain as day.”
(John 1:14-18, *The Message*)

For most of you, I’m sure, this passage of Scripture is very familiar. Familiar or not, I want to zoom in on a few key words and phrases in these verses today.

Let’s start with this: “*The Word became flesh*” (1:14). As we have seen, the word for “Word” is *logos*, which John uses to describe the expression or communication of God’s personality or essence. The “Word” – this perfect, complete expression of God’s personality – is Jesus. Hebrews 1:3 says: “The Son” – Jesus – “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being.” *The Message* paraphrase says: “This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God’s nature.” It is another way of saying that Jesus *is* God. Always was and always will be. We miss the main message of the Bible and the meaning of Christmas

itself if we fail to see and embrace the truth that the baby whose birth we celebrate was and is fully God.

This is perhaps not the most refined theological statement you will ever hear, but listen to what Paul David Hewson (aka “Bono”) has said about Jesus: “I think a defining question for a Christian is: Who was Christ? And I don’t think you’re let off easily by saying a great thinker or a great philosopher, because actually He went around saying He was the Messiah.” [It sounds like he is channeling C.S. Lewis from *Mere Christianity*.] “That’s why He was crucified. He was crucified because He said He was the Son of God. So, He either, in my view, was the Son of God, or He was ... nuts. Forget rock ‘n roll messianic complexes, this is like Charles Manson type delirium. And I find it hard to accept that ... millions and millions of lives, half the earth, for two thousand years have been touched, have felt their lives touched by some nutter” (Quoted by Mauro Pianta, Vatican Insider, 4-15-14).

A more recognized theologian, Irenaeus, a 2nd-century church leader, said of Jesus: “The Word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of His great love for mankind, became what we are in order to make us what He is Himself” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*). Perhaps C.S. Lewis was channeling Irenaeus when he said: “The Son of God became a man to enable (us) to become (children) of God” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 155).

Theologian Dale Bruner describes Jesus as “The audible, visible Word who expressed the heart of the inaudible, invisible God. Jesus Christ,” he says, “is God’s great Visual Aid.” Bruner quotes Origen, a theologian from the 3rd century, who told the story of a village with a huge statue, so immense you couldn’t see who it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone “miniaturized” the statue so people could see the person it represented. Origen said: “This is what God did in His Son.” In Colossians 1:15, says Bruner, Paul tells us that Jesus is the self-miniaturization of God, the visible image of the invisible God. (Or, as it says in *The Message*: “We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created.”) In Jesus we have God in a comprehensible way. In Jesus – the Word – we have God’s own personal and definitive visit to our planet. (Adapted from Bruner, “Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?” *Theology, News, and Notes of Fuller Seminary*, October 1999.)

To quote one more theologian, the late James I. Packer wrote in his masterpiece *Knowing God*: “The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this. The babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think of it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the Incarnation” (Packer, *Knowing God*, 45-46). And the truth it is.

The Word – Jesus, the *Logos* of God – *became flesh*. In other words, He became a real human being, a real human baby who grew to become a real man. The word “became” speaks of a change in condition or state of being. What it means is that at a particular moment in history (2,000+ years ago), in a particular place (in Bethlehem of Judea), the eternally pre-existent Son of God, who was fully God Himself, *became* the incarnate Son of God and made His dwelling – for 33 short years – among us.

The Message paraphrase that I shared with you earlier says: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14). If you’ve ever wondered what the “neighborhood” was like that Jesus moved into – not so much the immediate neighborhood of His birth in Bethlehem (we know how modest and sparse the surroundings were when He was born), nor the immediate neighborhood of His growing up years in Nazareth, where He learned from Joseph the trade of carpentry, but the “neighborhood” of the world into which He was born, I can assure you it was not like Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood!

Author Philip Yancey describes the conditions into which Jesus was born this way: “A succession of great empires tramped through the territory of Israel as if wiping their feet on the vaunted Promised Land. After the Assyrians and Babylonians came the Persians, who were in turn defeated by Alexander the Great. He was eventually followed by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Jews’ worst villain until Hitler. Antiochus began waging war against the Jewish religion. He transformed the temple of God into a worship center for Zeus and proclaimed himself God incarnate.... He flogged an aged priest to death for refusing to eat pork {which, of course, observant Jews, don’t do}. In one of his most notorious acts, he sacrificed an unclean pig on the altar in the Most Holy Place, smearing its blood around the temple sanctuary.” [He did other unspeakable acts that I will not mention.]

“Antiochus’s actions so incensed the Jews that they rose up in an armed revolt that is celebrated every year as the holiday Hanukkah. But their victory was short-lived. Before long, Roman legions marched into Palestine to quash the rebellion and appointed Herod as their “King of the Jews.” After the Roman conquest, nearly the entire land lay in ruins. Herod was sickly and approaching 70 when he heard rumors of a new king born in Bethlehem, and soon howls of grief from the families of slain infants (would drown) out the angels’ chorus of “Glory to God ... and on earth peace.” First-century Israel was a conquered, cowed nation. This, then, was the neighborhood Jesus moved into: a sinister place with a somber past and a fearful future.” (Adapted from Yancey, *The Question That Never Goes Away*.)

In some ways, it sounds like the neighborhood of the world today, with all its oppression and strife, dangers, restrictions, uncertainty, and fear. Into a world like ours, into a neighborhood like ours, Jesus came. As messed up as the world was then (and is now), Jesus came willingly. Not against His will but freely. To show us His love. And to make a way for us to have peace with God.

We need Jesus in our neighborhood today. We need Jesus in our world. We need Jesus in our country. We need Jesus even more than we need a COVID-19 vaccine ... and we need the vaccine badly! We need Jesus in our church – which is, after all, *His* church. We need Jesus in our marriages. In our families. In our schools. In our businesses. In our military. In our government. In our politics. In our vocations. In our social media posts. We need Jesus to be at the heart of every area of our lives.

We need Jesus to give us strength for today and hope for tomorrow as we continue to deal with the plague of the coronavirus and all its ripple effects on virtually every area of life. The warp-speed development of vaccines to combat the spread of COVID-19 may well be a modern medical miracle – and we ought to praise God for it – but it is not the ground or

source of our hope for meaning or peace or lasting joy in life. When you are facing a personal crisis or a financial crisis, when you find yourself in the valley of death's dark shadow (Psalm 23:4), a COVID vaccine will not provide the comfort or hope you need. What you need is the absolute guarantee that Jesus, the Word who became flesh and moved into our neighborhood – the Son of God who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) – is with you. He has gone before you. He has blazed the trail of salvation for you. He stared death in the face and endured a horrible death for you. He willingly took your guilt and mine in His death for us. He came to die for you. And He is *with* you. Right now. He is with you *always*.

At just the right time, God sent His Son into this world of sin and sorrow and suffering (Galatians 4:4). He moved into our neighborhood. He lived among us and, when the time came, He gave up His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. For your sins and mine.

What John actually says in verse 14 is: “The Word became flesh and tabernacled [or, pitched a tent] among us.” That is actually what he says. He uses the verb form of the word for tent or tabernacle. And, of course, you know that in the Old Testament, before Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem, it was the movable tabernacle, first constructed as the Lord directed Moses to direct the people of Israel in the wilderness following their exodus from Egypt, that represented the presence of God with His people and served as the center of the worship life of Israel.

Those of you who are or have been scouts, or who just enjoy camping, know what is involved in pitching a tent and setting up camp. It is a metaphor for what Jesus did when He came to live among us. By pitching His tent in our neighborhood, by tabernacling with us, Jesus made the presence of God visible, so that now, as John says in verse 18, even though no one has ever seen God, Jesus – the eternal Word who became flesh and blood and bone – “has made Him plain as day” (MSG).

Jesus took residence among people like us. In our world. He made this broken world His residence for 33 years. And the truth is that Jesus has never abandoned our neighborhood. He has not given up on this world. He has not given up on you or me. He is still at work to redeem this world, to redeem *us*, to make His glory and grace and truth known to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

There are three more words I want you to take notice of today: *Glory*, *grace*, and *truth*. Speaking of Jesus the Word, John says in verse 14: “We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son of God, who came from the Father, who is full of grace and truth.” Then, in verses 16 and 17: “From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace [one blessing after another (NIV)]. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (ESV).

The coming of Jesus reveals the glory of God in a new way. The Old Testament word for “glory” is *shekinah*. The New Testament word is *doxa*. We get the word “Doxology” from it. It is a response of praise we sing to God in recognition of the greatness of His glory and grace to us.

Applied to God, the word “glory” speaks of the greatness and splendor of our King, His magnificence and perfect completeness, His absolute worthship, the only proper response to which is worship. We worship God because He is worthy. We worship God the Son because He is worthy.

I suppose we could say that in the incarnation, the glory of Jesus was muted glory. His glory as the eternal Son of God was hidden to a degree. Not everyone recognized it. But it was revealed, clothed in His humility. Paul speaks of the humility and glory of Jesus in Philippians 2, where He writes that Jesus,

Being in nature God ... made Himself nothing
 taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 He humbled Himself and became obedient to death,
 even death on a cross.
 Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place
 and gave Him the name above every name,
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ...
 and every tongue confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.
 (Philippians 2:6-11)

The child of Bethlehem – the Word who became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood – is the visible expression of the glory of God.

Not only so, He is also the embodiment of *grace* and *truth*. There is not time to talk about these sufficiently today. For now, I will just remind you that grace, by its nature, is something completely undeserved. It is an undeserved gift. And we who receive it are undeserving of it. It is a gift that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like when, instead of a speeding ticket, a police officer gives you a Krispy Kreme donut. That is grace.

But grace is not a one-time thing. Through Jesus, John says, we receive “grace upon grace,” grace on top of grace. God’s grace is an endless reservoir. F.F. Bruce put it this way: “In the ocean of God’s fullness, one wave of grace is constantly replaced by a fresh one. There is no limit to the supply of grace God has placed at our disposal in Christ” (Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 43). The supply of grace you need from God will never run dry. His grace will always be sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9).

And that is the truth. *He* is the truth. *Jesus* is the truth. *The gospel* of His saving love is the truth. He is the truth that sets us free (John 8:32).

In this Christmas season and every season, in the best of times and the worst of times, in periods of pandemics and prosperity, in all the ups and downs of life, in the midst of sadness and joy, remember that “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the

neighborhood,” embodying the fullness of God’s grace and truth, in order to save sinners.
Including you.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.