

Second Sunday of Christmas January 2, 2022

John 1:[1-9] 10-18

And the Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us... Jesus, Word of God made flesh, incarnate. Anyone who has had carne asada knows what that word means...Carne- meat/flesh. Incarnation is in the flesh.

The physical body is vital to us as Christians, especially those who happen to be Lutheran.

For us as Lutherans, our very definition of church- the assembly of believers gathered around word and sacrament- depends on physical bodies being assembled. We talk about using liturgy- which literally means the work of the people- in worship. This implies that our worship is one that is embodied in us. As we assemble, stand, sit, kneel, sing, speak, move, eat, drink, hear all actions which are made possible through the flesh, through the body.

Unlike many world religions and at least one Christian heresy (Gnosticism) which see the flesh as something to be done away with, as corrupt beyond redeeming, even as evil, Christians believe in the importance and goodness of the whole of who we are as human beings- body and soul.

While Paul acknowledges the weakness of the flesh, he does so within a context that accepts human beings as created with both flesh and spirit. Both are what God has called “very good” in Genesis when God looks upon humans- male and female made in God’s image. Both flesh and soul are redeemed through Jesus, God made flesh.

Going even further, we believe in the physical resurrection of the dead- that God in Jesus has saved the physicalness of our existence, not just the soul. That the Jesus who rose was no ghost or force projection, but rather the physical body and spirit of Christ together.

As we have discovered anew in this pandemic, we are a people who need human contact. Embodiment is important. We know through science as well as experience that touch calms our nervous center and slows down our heartbeat. Human touch also lowers blood pressure as well as cortisol, our stress hormone. Social interaction helps our physical and mental well being in a way that mediated interaction through screens cannot. Think about the difference between reading that text, having them speak it over the phone or on Zoom, and hearing them say it in person.

If we did not need this enfleshment, then there was no need for Jesus. No need for God to enter fully into this existence. God could have continued to use prophets.

Ours is a God who risks something for us, the created. Who bothers to come down into the mess we have made of creation, to live in less than ideal circumstances, to experience the reality of existence in this world from the underside- a blue collar family, an occupied people, with no power or privilege, just living.

That God has done this shows God's love for us. In Jesus, God has come to us in a way which we can grasp as humans. Jesus is God's best self-expression to us, the best way we can begin to get a sense who God is and what God desires for us and from us.

In Jesus, God does not say, do this. God says, I am this. In Jesus, God does not demand this. God gives this. Jesus is God come down to us- not us going up to God. Jesus is the embodiment of what my late seminary professor Ralph Klein used to say, that God's final answer to us is always yes.

However, the enfleshment of God in Jesus also demands something from us as believers. Our flesh is something to be valued, is called by God not just good but very good because it is essential to who we are as humans. So, we should honor that enfleshment wherever we find it. In ourselves, certainly, but also in other human beings- regardless of shape, color, sex, gender identity, language, country of origin, political belief.

This idea is what leads Luther to say in a Christmas Eve Sermon- “There are many who think as follows. ‘Oh, if I had only been there how well I would have served the infant; I would have washed His crib and made His bed. Oh, if only I were as fortunate as the shepherds to see Him lying the manger,’ and the like. Yes, you would do that now since you know how great Christ is. But you would have done just as little for Him as did the citizens of Bethlehem in their day. Those are childish and foolish thoughts. Why don’t you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor whom you shall serve with good works. What you do for your neighbor who is suffering and stuck in misery, you do for Christ Himself as He will say on the last day to the elect. ‘What you have done for these My poor brothers you have done for Me.’ That is why it is so annoying, yes, foolish to hear such childish thoughts.”

The incarnation brings our faith into human scale. Into the here and now, not some future pie in the sky by and by. It demands that we attend to our life now,

that we work to embody the reign of God now, here, in this place and time and not wait for it until Jesus comes again in glory.

We do that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless. We do that when we attend to the physical needs of our neighbors, their flesh, knowing that their spirit will be aided as well. These fellow human beings in need are Jesus in the manger for us.

The incarnation also shows God's grace to us. For God knows that we humans like concrete things. What we can see, taste, touch, smell. And we as Christians who happen to be Lutheran point to the means of God's grace as signs of this attention to what we need. For each is embodied in voice, water, bread, wine. God come down and experienced in a way we cannot deny. The sharp tang of the wine as it hits that point right at the hinge of your jaw. The water that jolts a sleeping child awake at baptism. Crying aloud, something is happening.

God comes to us in, with, and under these things when combined with the promise of God's Word to us. Baptized in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is my body, this is my blood.

God come to us in these finite things, that hold the infinite, the promise of God.

What does this mean for us?

What does it mean that God was present in the child in the manger? That humanity and God head met here in this child. That fully human and fully divine met in the new math that was one Jesus?

It means that God is no distant watchmaker who created the world, wound it up, and left it to its own devices. God is no cosmic butler who we call upon for favors

like getting us out of the consequences of not studying for the test, or making us on time, or getting us that gift we really want. God is, instead, a present reality in this world. Beside us now in the breathing human being there. It means that we are, for our neighbor, to be Christ for one another. The embodiment of the God whose image we bear within us. A visible sign and experience of God's love, mercy, and grace.

We live in a time where we seem blind to the image of God that lies in one another. In fact, we blaspheme against that image by ignoring it, abusing it, killing it all because- they don't look like me, or think like me, or believe what I do, or pay the taxes I do, or work as hard as I do.

I struggle with this, my friends. With the bounds we place on what and how we will provide for our fellow human beings. There are consequences for actions, absolutely, but where will my placing of those boundaries cause serious physical, mental, or spiritual harm for that one? Is this really what God calls us to do? What Jesus would do? Am I not called to give my all to see that they are made whole? That they have the basics for life; food, shelter, clothing?

We live in a time where the only authority that seems to exist is me. The only arbiter of truth is me. We have lost the sense that there exists outside of us an authority, a truth, that is real even when I don't think it is. That when God says to love our neighbor and pray for those who persecute me, that command is valid even when I don't think it is.

What does it mean that God has come down to us and pitched a tent, to live in and among us?

It means God is as close as the breath of my wife on my cheek. The smile of my friend at the door. The child alone at the border. It means that the created world can and does contain the infinite and is worthy of care and attention for that reason alone.

How does the incarnation change things for you? For how you see the people around you? The world around you?

These are the things I invite you to ponder with me this second Sunday of Christmas. To take seriously the 30,000 foot view of John by bringing it down into the granular level of our every day life. To ponder what God made flesh, come into this time and place means for your daily life.

As you do so, sing, stand, move, eat, drink- and know that each of these things and our ability to do them is a gracious gift of Emmanuel, God with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Who is the promised Christ.