

“God in the flesh”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve — December 24, 2019

Luke 2:1-20 and John 1:1-14

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Once upon a time, there was great suffering on the earth. People felt lost, afraid. So Jesus came among humanity, and asked them, just as he once asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” One person said he was a wise teacher, and if only we could listen, there would be peace. Another said he was a good man, whose compassion and righteousness we should emulate. Another said he was a figment of the imagination, no longer relevant, no longer interesting. But none of these answers seemed to alleviate any of the suffering. So Jesus said unto the theologians, “Who do *you* say that I am?” They replied, “You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma of which we find the ultimate meaning in our interpersonal relationships.” And Jesus said, “... What?”

It’s funny—there are all these answers out there, and we still don’t really know. Who is this man whose birth we celebrate tonight? We could say, with Peter, that he is “the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16). We could recite the Apostles Creed: “Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.” We could utter oracles like John, describing the Word who spoke creation into being, the Light that shines in the darkness.

Except, do we actually believe any of this?

Statistics are not our friend this evening. My generation of Millennials are the first among whom fewer than half believe in Jesus Christ. And among all generations, devoted discipleship is down. People are busy; they have other priorities. But they’re also skeptical.

I’m skeptical too. (Am I allowed to say that?) I don’t know if I buy into all the elements of this story either. And I see a lot of Christians speaking, and behaving, in very unChristian ways, incarcerating immigrants, separating families, hating others just because they’re different, turning away the poor, serving God only when it’s convenient.

And yet here I stand. Because I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the one sent to return us to God, to heal the broken love between us. I believe Jesus is God in the flesh.

For a long time, that didn’t make sense to me—the idea that an eternal, infinite, incomprehensible God (in whom I had no trouble believing) would become something as limited and parochial as one person, in one little part of the world. Some of you may think similarly; I respect that. I certainly don’t pretend to understand all this. But I will tell you how I came to see God in Jesus.

It was on a late evening like this one. I had just finished my first year of seminary, and was working as a chaplain at a trauma-one hospital in New Jersey. The nurse had paged me and

asked me to come to the oncology unit, where a man was yelling, thrashing, unable to calm down, convinced he was having a heart attack every few minutes.

When I sat down beside his bed, he told me that when his family visits, they only argue. He hadn't even held the hand of his wife for weeks. He felt alone. He was angry. I didn't know what to say. Suddenly all my ideas of God were so small. What good was a wise teaching or a distant eternal power to this man? He couldn't simply will himself to feel better, to have a different outlook on life. He needed help. He needed a God he could touch, a God who would crawl into that bed with him, feel the cancer, weep and rage with him, face death with him, love him with a love so big that it made even death, even cancer, feel puny.

And then something happened that I didn't fully intend. I ended up holding his hand for hours. At first, it was while we prayed. But then, as we prayed, this calm came over him, and he fell into a deep sleep. I was stuck! My hand was in his. So I left it there and prayed silently beside his bed. I held his hand, the hand that had not been held for a long time. I held his hand, and peace washed over him. And it was then that I understood why anything short of the Incarnation—God in the flesh—was just not enough.

Soren Kierkegaard tells the story of a powerful king who fell in love with a poor peasant. But he had a problem: "If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear?... He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them... The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise... He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers."

What Kierkegaard is saying, and what I learned in that hospital room, is that having a distant God or king is not enough—not for the God who desires us, and not if we want love. Love must be actively chosen and expressed, or it is not love. Love doesn't sit back and contemplate esoterica; Love walks with you, sings with you, suffers with you, marches into hell for you.

And that is precisely what we need. Because we are stranded on an island. We are cut off from God, from each other, from our true selves. The evidence is all around us: war, anxiety, greed, arrogance, loneliness. Everywhere it is clear: we aren't who we are supposed to be. Paul Tillich calls this a state of "existential estrangement," alienation, from the "ground of our being," from the source of our true self—and all its joy, its love, its reality.

We can't get off this island on our own. We can't save ourselves. If we could, we would have done it a long time ago. We need help. Wise teachings and moral examples don't cut it, because they still leave the burden on us.

God has to save us. God has to be the One to heal the rift, to reconnect us, so that we can then choose to love God back. But God can't do it from the outside, anymore than Kierkegaard's king could. God has to come among us and experience the pain of that estrangement for Himself.

Henri Nouwen writes, "Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being hurt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart? [...] In short: Who can take away suffering without entering it? The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there... No God can save us except a suffering God."

This is the central belief of Christianity—that at a single point in time, in a single person, with real hair, and real skin, God appeared, experienced the fullness of our humanity and freed that humanity with the fullness of his divinity. I don't mean we have to take everything—from virginity to angels to magi—literally. I mean that there is no Christianity without Incarnation, without a God who, out of love, comes to us and restores us to ourselves.

Once upon a time, Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" He received so many inadequate answers, until finally a child in the very back lifted her hand and said, "You are Love."

"And what is love?" Jesus asked.

The child thought for a moment, and then said, "Love is when my mama holds me, when my papa kisses me. Love is together, not apart." And Jesus kissed the child on the head, lifted the child in his arms and swung her through the air, as she laughed, wind in her face, hair streaming. "You're right," he said. "I am the Love that holds God and people together. I am the Love that is more than an idea, more than a teaching. I am the Love that is here. The Love that shows you God, for I am God. And the Love that shows you your true self, the very heart of who you are, but forgot, for I am also you, a person. I am the Love that makes you God's children."

And the people smiled, because at last they understood. **Amen.**