

## **Word Becoming Flesh: The Incarnation, Then and Now**

**John 1:9-18**

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The Christmas season is a time of connecting with loved one—there are family gatherings, times spent together with friends and loved ones, there is the annual exchange of Christmas cards and letters with those we live far away from.

One good thing about moving from Arizona to Ohio is that we get to spend more time with Karen’s family here in Berne and in other places in this part of the country. The move also means that we don’t see my family as often, since they all live in California.

My parents believe strongly in the value of our family all getting together, so they organize a big family reunion every two years where all 8 of their children and our spouses and our children spend a week together in some place.

My parent’s primary motivation is probably to see their 13 grandchildren, but hey, I’m glad to go along for the ride. Being that we’re Italian, you can imagine the noise level we generate when we’re all together! That was kind of a culture shock for Karen, but she’s gotten used to it!

The last family reunion the Intagliata clan had was this past summer. My parents timed the reunion to coincide with our son Andrew’s wedding in Virginia Beach, which is the area where Andrew’s wife Diana grew up.

The highlight of each day during our reunions is at night when we all come together for dinner somewhere, and we share the experiences we all had during the day. One evening during our time in Virginia Beach, we had dinner at a Japanese restaurant—I think it was called the Otani grill.

It was one of those restaurants where they prepare the food right there in front of you. Your group sits around this table that is shaped like a big horseshoe, and in the middle of that horseshoe is a large, flat grill. Each table has its own personal chef who brings out the raw meat and vegetables and cooks it right there before your eyes.

While the chef is preparing the food, he's doing all kinds of fun and fancy things with it with the knives and other utensils. Like he bounced a whole egg on a spatula in such a way that it looks like the shell stretches like it's elastic and made of rubber.

Another crowd favorite was when he stacked the raw onion rings on the grill, pours some oil in the middle, then lights it on fire so it flares up like a volcano. That brought some shrieks from the kids and some oohs and aahs from the adults.

Another thing that's really fun is the way he served us the shrimp appetizers. After he grilled them, he cut them up in little pieces and then he targets one person after another around the table, launching them out at you with the side of the knife, and you try to catch it in your mouth.

Some of us left the restaurant that night with shrimp stains on our shirts!

So while your food is cooking at this restaurant, you're getting to know your chef, you're being entertained by this guy who's just having a ball showing off his culinary skills. You're also wondering if he was a Samurai warrior in another life!

By the time that meal was over, we had enjoyed a freshly-prepared delicious dinner right at our table that was a truly multi-sensory experience. We had seen, heard, smelled, touched and tasted our food, courtesy of our chef.

Not only that, but we had developed a personal relationship with our chef. We interacted with him, we admired his skills, and we laughed with him.

The person who had cooked our food was not some guy hidden away in a kitchen in some distant room, like you find in most restaurants. No, he was right there in our midst, in the flesh, and he had a face, he had personality and he had character.

You know in some ways what my family experienced at that Japanese restaurant is a lot like what John is talking about when he says that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (vs. 14).

Just as our chef came into our midst as diners, and became a real person to us, and developed a relationship with us on our turf,

With the incarnation, God comes into our midst, our world, as a real person in Jesus the Messiah, which gives us mortals the opportunity to have a personal relationship with him on our turf.

You see, the incarnation, the Word that became flesh, is the revelation of God in terms that we humans can understand. When God came to earth as the Christ child in that humble stable, all of a sudden we have a God who has a human face, a God who has a human personality, a God with human characteristics.

All barriers between human and divine are removed, wiped away, obliterated.

There's a story of a 4-year old girl who woke up one night frightened, convinced that there were all kinds of ghosts and monsters lurking in the darkness around her. Like most little kids do when they get scared, she ran into her parent's bedroom.

Her mother calms her down, takes her by the hand and leads her back to her bedroom. She tucks her back into bed and reassures her by saying, "You don't need to be afraid, honey. You are not alone here, because God is in the room with you."

Then the little girl said, "I know that God is here, mommy, but I need someone in the room who has some skin!"

This child expressed a profound truth that applies to all of humans, young and old. As human beings housed in physical bodies, we experience life through our five senses, through what we can see, hear, touch, smell and taste. It's something that we never grow out of, no matter how old we are.

So for God to be real to us, truly real, we need to be able to experience God in some way through our physical senses. We need a God with some skin, and God knows that, so how does God become real to us? Through the incarnation, through Jesus, a real man with skin and flesh and bones. Now we have a God who can be seen, heard, touched, and smelled.

And just like our chef who established a personal relationship with us at our table, with Jesus, God makes it possible for us to have a relationship with someone we can relate to as humans.

You see, since the beginning of creation, God has created us as social beings—we were meant live in relationship with Him, as well as with other people. God created Adam for companionship with Him, then created Eve to be a partner to Adam. We crave meaningful relationships—people to communicate with, people to interact with, people to share life with.

We're so relational that we will even turn inanimate objects into beings we can relate to. I think it's called anthropomorphism, giving personal qualities to things that aren't human.

The other day we were over at Roger and Mary's helping them figure out something with their computer. We open up a Word document and up pops this paper clip figure that looks and acts a lot like a little person—do you know what I'm talking about?

He's got eyes and arms and dances around the screen trying to tell you these things that could help you as you work on the computer. I say "he" because it's got to be a male paper clip, because he's always trying to fix your problems, like a typical guy!

I wonder if there's a female version that just sits there and listens to you swear at the computer but doesn't offer advice.

Anyway at that particular moment that anthropomorphic paper clip was annoying us because he was blocking some icons on the toolbar that we wanted to get to.

You should have been there to see three grown adults doing all they could to get rid of that pesky little paper clip guy—we were shouting and clicking our mouse and it took us about 10 minutes but we were finally able to make him disappear back into the computer somewhere.

Bill Gates knows something about what makes us humans tick. He knows that we crave personal relationships, that we long to be connected with others outside of ourselves, whether they be people, or deities, or even something as simple and silly as a paper clip! And it helps if they have anthropomorphic, human qualities.

Back when I was in college I first heard that phrase, "Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship". It's a relationship with the living God who comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Since I've been working with college students and young adults, I've been introduced to the books of Donald Miller. Young adults love Miller's writing, because he writes in a conversational style that's easy-to-read, honest and down-to-earth.

I read one of Miller's books with a group of students at Bluffton this fall, and they really got excited when Miller talked about how the Christian faith is more of a love relationship with God, falling in love with God, than it is a just a list of laws to obey to please God and keep him from getting angry with us.

I see how young adults today are looking for this kind of spirituality. They're not drawn to churches and a Christianity that is focused on rules and regulations; they're longing to fall in love with God and experience authentic relationships with others,

they want to be part of a community that backs up its beliefs with concrete actions, with things they can experience with their senses, things they can get involved in.

I know that we older folks are sometimes puzzled with all the ways that our children and their friends communicate with each other electronically. They all seem to have cell phones with text messaging,

They're always on the computer surfing the net or chatting with their friends on AIM or writing on someone's "wall" on facebook.

Now I believe there's no substitute for face-to-face relationships. But young people today live in an increasingly transient world, where there's lots of moving around, where relationships seem more tenuous and transitory than they were in the past.

And with all this new technology, it helps them stay connected with people. Not only that, but the doors have been opened up even wider to have contact with people in places and in ways that we never could when I was a teenager.

All this technology is really about developing relationships with other people, which is what all of us want and need as human beings.

It's interesting that there's this movement going on called **new monasticism**, which is largely young adult Christians with a common vision living in intentional

communities in different neighborhoods around the country, trying to make a difference in the world, building relationships with each other and with those around them.

In many ways, they're trying to take the incarnation of Jesus seriously.

John says, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The word "dwelt" literally means, to "pitch a tent", referring to God's accompanying the Israelites in their tent-like tabernacles during their years of wandering in the desert.

Eugene Peterson in The Message version of the Bible, translates "dwelt among us" with the words "moved into the neighborhood".

The incarnation means that Jesus moved into the neighborhood to make friends and share the love and grace of God with those around him.

In 33 years of living in the neighborhood, only three of which took place during his actual ministry, Jesus rubbed shoulders with all kinds of folks in all kinds of neighborhoods. He healed the sick, cured the lame, he forgave people's sins.

Jesus broke bread with the well-respected as well as with the outcasts of society. He defended the cause of the oppressed. He treated everyone with compassion and respect. Sometimes in bringing hope to the hopeless, he made some people angry.

Jesus as God incarnate invited people to trust him with their lives, to follow him and join him in his kingdom ministry.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus showed his love for humanity by giving up his own life so that we could experience new life. He left us a great gift, the Holy Spirit, to dwell within us so that God's presence would continue to remain on earth.

But the physical body of Christ has ascended into heaven. So does that mean that the incarnation is over with? Does it mean that the incarnation was just a short 33 year period in God's history of dealing with the world?

If so, then I guess that those lucky people who actually knew Jesus in the flesh got the better end of deal. They actually got to know the Son of God personally, face to face. What about the rest of us, everyone who was born after AD 33 until now and until the end of time on earth as we know it?

In a way it feels like we're being shortchanged if we only see the incarnation as a thing of the past. Or is there another way to look at it? Could it be possible that in some way, some very concrete way, that the body of Christ is actually physically present in the world today, the world we live in, 2000 years after the human Jesus walked on earth?

Recently I discovered some ideas by a Catholic author named Ronald Rolheiser that have challenged me to look at the incarnation and the body of Christ in a new way. I found these ideas in his book *The Holy Longing*, which I highly recommend to you.

(It's interesting that even though I no longer belong to the Catholic Church, I find that a lot of my favorite authors are Catholic. People like Rolheiser, and Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr and Brennan Manning, to name a few.)

Anyway, Rolheiser talks about the meaning of the phrase "the body of Christ" in three ways:

First, it refers to what we've been talking about this morning, as **Jesus' physical body** that began as the baby in the manger and ended with his ascension into heaven. This is the traditional understanding of the incarnation, the 33 years of Jesus' life on this earth.

Second, Rolheiser says, the body of Christ can also refer to the **Eucharist**, which for Catholics is the physical presence of God among us, though we as Mennonites would call it communion and see it as a real but more symbolic presence of Christ.

And third, Rolheiser points out that the body of Christ can also mean the **body of believers**, or the Church. The apostle Paul often refers to the Church this way in his letters, as the body of Christ, which has been given gifts to share with each other and the world.

If we take Paul's use of the phrase seriously, then could it be that we as the body of Christ, the Church, are the physical body of Christ in the world today. Listen to what Rolheiser says about this:

The body of believers...is the body of Christ in an organic way. It is not a corporation, but a body; not just a mystical reality, but a physical one; and not something that represents Christ, but something that is him.

He goes on to say:

This has immense implications. It means that the incarnation did not end after 33 years, when Jesus ascended. God is still here, in the flesh, just as real and just as physical, as God was in Jesus. The word did not just become flesh and dwell among us—it became flesh and *continues* to dwell among us. In the body of believers...God still has physical skin and can still be physically seen, touched, smelled, heard, and tasted.

But this is not simply a truth of theology, a dogma to be believed. It is the core of Christian spirituality. If it is true that we are the Body of Christ...then God's presence in the world today depends very much upon us. We have to keep God present in the world in the same way as Jesus did. We have to become, as Teresa of Avila so simply put it, God's physical hands, feet, mouthpiece, and heart in this world. (p. 80, *The Holy Longing*)

If we read the gospels, I think it's clear that this is exactly what Jesus was saying to his disciples.

At different times when Jesus sends out his disciples, he gave them the same authority and the power that he has to carry out the ministry of the Kingdom of God. Near the end of the gospel of John-- the same John who began his book with the incarnation of Jesus-- in one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to them, he does this again.

This is in John 20:21-23, which by the way is the passage behind the theme for the Mennonite Convention in Columbus this summer, which is "Breathe and Be Filled". Jesus says here,

*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld".*

Can you hear the power and authority that Jesus is giving to his disciples? The authority to forgive sins is something only God can do. And now also people can do that, people who represent God on earth in human form, in the flesh.

I believe that what Jesus is saying here was not only meant for the original 12 disciples, but it's meant for all disciples in every generation that follows. It's like Jesus is saying, to them and to us,

“Since I’m not going to be around on earth any more, you are the incarnation of the future, you will take my place, through you people will know me and know my forgiveness, know my love, and my grace, through you people will know my healing power.”

Rolheiser tells the story of a scene from the movie *The Serpent’s Egg* by Ingmar Bergman. A middle-aged woman enters a Catholic church right after the mass is over and begins pouring her heart out to the priest. She has doubts about God and her faith that plague her, she’s lonely in her marriage, and she begins to sob and talk about how unlovable she is.

*“I’m so alone, Father, nobody loves me! God is so far away! I don’t think he could love me anyway. Not the way I am! Everything is so dark for me!”*

*After a moment, the priest says to the woman: “Kneel down and I will bless you. God seems far away. He cannot touch you right now, I know that, but I am going to put my hands on your head and touch you—to let you know that you are not alone, not unlovable, not in the darkness. God is here and God does love you. When I touch you, God will touch you.”*

We as Mennonites believe in the priesthood of all believers. So just like that priest did, when you and I touch someone with love as Jesus loved, then God is touching them with love.

When you and I comfort someone with the same comfort that Jesus comforted people, then that person is experiencing God’s comfort.

When you and I welcome someone into our home, for a meal or for an overnight stay, then they are experiencing the hospitality of Jesus.

When you and I forgive a sin that someone has confessed to us, then Jesus is forgiving them.

As parents, when you and I give our blessing, our unconditional love, to our children—even when they disappoint us and fall short of our expectation-- then our children are being blessed by no less than God himself.

When we say to someone “I will pray that God will help you”, because we are the physical presence of God on earth, it may mean that God’s answer to that prayer

depends on us doing something to help that person. We are sometimes the answer to our own prayers for others.

I believe that sometimes God works in ways that are supernatural and miraculous, way that have nothing to do with us.

But more commonly, God works in the world through people, you and I, the body of Christ, and the incarnation happens in the midst of the ordinary events and relationships in our daily lives, if we open ourselves up to it.

As the Christmas season ends, the season of Epiphany begins. Epiphany is a time when we look for signs in our midst of the unfolding of the mystery of the incarnation of Christ, which is the miracle of Christmas.

May you and I and the Church be the body of Christ to those around us, in and outside the Church. May we humbly and courageously embrace our identity as Christ's physical presence in the world, and may we compassionately carry out Christ's kingdom ministry as his hands and his feet and his heart now and throughout all the days that God has given us on this earth. AMEN!