

“Another Messy Christmas”

John 1:1-14

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Some years ago I attended an all day workshop on worship. After we had dealt with the meaning of the Lord's Supper, infant baptism, and the pros and cons of children's sermons, a hand shot up from the back of the room during the beginning of the question and answer period.

"There's one thing about our worship service that really gripes me," a fifty-ish year old man complained. "It's like fingernails being scraped across the blackboard."

I began to ponder all of the topics that might be on this man's mind: inclusive language, new fangled hymns the congregation doesn't like, politics in the pulpit, or sermons on stewardship?

"What's your gripe?" the leader asked. "The announcements. I just hate it when the minister spoils the mood of worship with all those dull announcements." Heads bobbed in vigorous agreement all around the room. The announcements were out of favor with this crowd, no doubt about it!

I knew what the man meant, of course. You're soaring above the pews on Sunday, your wings catching the strong breeze of the worship experience ... and then the announcements: "the Inreach Council has canceled its meeting next week," and so on...

The announcements do seem like a bag of peanuts at the opera, a messy moment seeping its way into an hour of orderly inspiration.

The leader of our workshop sympathized with this man. Yes, the announcements were often rattled off without care or passion, he said. And yes, they did sometimes seem to be somewhat uninspiring, but after all, the details of the church's institutional life were important and a couple of minutes of them couldn't hurt...

What the speaker failed to say, though, was that properly understood, the announcements are one of those places where the rubber of the church's theology hits the road. Indeed, it just may be that by moving seamlessly from the preaching and the singing and the praying to announcing changes in the weekly schedule, by punctuating its soaring praise with the commas of the earthly details of its common life, the church is expressing in its worship one of its most basic convictions about the character of God: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." (Jn. 1:14)

That affirmation about the eternal Word becoming flesh comes, of course, from the poem which opens the Gospel of John, and which we usually read the first week or two following Christmas. The poem begins with violins and soaring phrases: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." With these ethereal phrases at the beginning of John's gospel, it is no wonder that the church selected, as a symbol for John the Evangelist, the high-flying eagle.

If John's gospel had ended after that first line, the noble Greek philosophers of antiquity could have voiced their admiring approval. They, too, wanted to mount up with eagle's wings, to leave the earth behind, and to ascend into the celestial heights to be with God and the *logos*, God's Word.

But John's gospel does not end with that first line. The eagle suddenly dives towards the ground. The violins give way to the blunt thud of a bass drum. Heaven crashes to earth. For it is time for the first startling earth-bound announcement in Christian history: "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

Many of us seem to believe that the original Christmas setting was "pure" in a sense—Mary dressed in blue, Jesus in clean swaddling clothes, and Joseph standing attentively near. The animals look on adoringly. We long for the same purity in our own Christmas celebrations. We spend a ton of money to brighten up our dark world and wrap it in tinsel, bows, and packages. We leave the "flesh" out of Christmas and dress it up in the artificial veneer of white wings, children's pageants, and Santas at the mall.

Might we imagine, however, the harsh economic realities, the unseemly political histories, the tense religious struggles, and formidable social boundaries wrapped in the package of Christmas in the time of Jesus? Even Jesus' own personal family history is hardly "pure" or "virginal." His mother is young, homeless, unwed, pregnant, and poor. Jesus' ancestry and lineage is mixed at best. Accused in some accounts of being an illegitimate child, Jesus' entry into this world is hardly what we would expect of God's only child. The holy family would more likely qualify for Food Stamps than the cover of a church bulletin.

Christmas has nothing to do with the drama of some idealized, perfect family. It is a messy story bordering on scandal in a messy world filled with injustice. And it is no accident that into *that* family story and into *that* historical moment, the Word became flesh.

And so it is today. When the Word becomes flesh, all human life and history are infused with holiness. In our American culture that is obsessed with perfection, is it really good news that God comes in *our flesh*? In all of the messiness in *our* lives? In *our* imperfections? In *our* limitations? Ironically, we make this good news something other than it is.

The great writer Martin Buber believed that God gives each one of us a speck of the world to redeem—an infant spark of creation to nurture into fullness of life. What is that particular spark in you as you look to a new year? Is it a relationship that is ripe for commitment? Is it a family rift ready to be healed? Is it a vocational dream waiting to be realized? Is it a moral decision ready to be claimed? Is it a creative instinct waiting to be expressed? What is the holy in *your* messy self yearning to be born?

When the Word becomes flesh, we come to know that there is no corner of human experience so hidden that God's grace cannot find it. There is no soil so sterile that the seed of holy wonder cannot grow in it. There is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the light of God who even now shines in it. The ordinary, everyday messy world of ours is where we find this Word becoming flesh.

Indeed, the announcements in worship became symbolic of the Christian truth that it is in the messy "fleshy" details of life, the hurts and needs of others, the working and the serving, committee meetings, mission trips to Guatemala and the local community projects, the being born, the marrying, and the dying, these are the arenas for our encounter with God-becoming-flesh in Jesus Christ. These are the places where that holiness is to be found.

The writer Max DePree tells of an early experience with his granddaughter Zoe. She was born prematurely; weighing only one pound, seven ounces, Zoe was so small a wedding ring could slide up her arm to her shoulder. Her doctor said she had a five to ten percent chance of living for three days. When Max visited Zoe, she had two IVs in her navel, one in her foot, a monitor on each side of her chest, a respirator tube and a feeding tube in her mouth. Zoe's biological father had left. Consequently, the nurse told Max that he must come to the hospital every day and rub her body, her legs and arms with the tip of his finger. While doing that, he was to say to her how much he loved her. It was essential that his voice be connected to his touch.

And so the Word becomes flesh and lives among us, and we continue to see his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Amen.