

“Bringing Hope, Receiving Faith”

John 1:10-18

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Above my desk is a piece of art given to me many years ago by my sister. It is counted cross stitch which says “God be with me in my words and in my serving”. Now I probably look at that at least ten times a day and see it maybe once a week. I know it’s there. It’s hung in every office of every church I have served and it reminds me when I see it that the work of ministry is based on prayer and faith, first, not intellect and reason for you see it is a prayer I ought say each day. BUT, and that is a huge BUT, my failure is to look at it each day and see it only once a week at most. And today’s Gospel reading reminded me of my own failure.

John’s birth narrative is not a birth narrative of a child but of a reality. It is, according to which commentator you read, a hymn, a prayer, a confession of faith, or a philosophical statement of faith. One commentator, maybe the most honest one said the only way to preach this passage would be to read it, then place the open bible on the communion table or altar, and then prostrate oneself face down in front of it for about the normal length of a sermon! That may be the only way to show that one was seeking meaning from this. But being a more typical preacher type, I will persevere with a sermon.

John’s gospel opens with this statement that parallels in many ways the creation myth of Genesis and which offers a direct reply to the early church’s concern over Jesus humanity. It is a clear confession that Jesus was fully human and fully divine thus offering strong support on behalf of those supporting the Anti-docetic school. Docetism was the belief in the early church that Jesus had had no physical body as we would understand such and thus was divine but not fully human. John’s gospel may have been an early salvo against such a belief; however, I am not here to dig around in that controversy some 1900 years later.

There are several interesting parts of this passage and today I want to focus on “and the word became flesh and dwelt among us”. The notion of “logos” becoming flesh or human is one of incarnation. It is the recognition that God’s indwelling presence is among us, among the human community in that most human of all things – speech. Consider what it means to speak. We don’t consider that much I would guess. Most of us, especially preachers, talk all the time it may seem. Our mouths are forever forming sounds and putting forth words which occasionally have real meaning. But words are so important as the foundation of our lives. Think about them.

In our day and our society, we think most often of words as a written language, as literature and philosophy, fiction and newspapers, magazines and e-mail. We are a literate society who values literacy as a core value. Whenever we compare societies, it is literacy, the ability of people to read words, to decode the symbols we call writing, which is one of the key measures of progress in a society. Now John is written to a pre-literate society. It is one in which only a very few could read and write. Words were the spoken language and it is they which conveyed the ideas, the notions, the vision of the society to its members. John’s confession that the Word became

flesh is a clear statement of God's integral and radical involvement with how the society interacted and created its communities.

The logos became flesh and dwelt among the people. Here the word for dwelt is really better translated as "pitched a tent". What great language to use for a people whose lives were lived perhaps in permanent structures though many were more nomadic and did live in tents, but overall whose histories included that journey through the wilderness from the oppressive life in Egypt. But the tent also symbolized where the Ark of the Covenant was stored, where the very presence of God was known to be. There is a double meaning here for me. It is a notion that God's presence was a common and everyday as those shepherds whose lives were lived in the pastures tending to their livestock but was also as transitory as they. God's presence isn't geographically tied as in a building. God's presence is transitory, it moves and changes place with the community of believers with whom God travels.

The word became flesh is also a statement of belief that God's presence is an active presence, one which requires response by those who know it. Consider how in this society we have struggled with language throughout our history. The so-called struggles with "political correctness" are overall struggles over language, over words because we know words matter. Their use affects hearers and speakers, readers and writers. Language, words matter. If the word became flesh and dwelt among us then we are well aware of that. And it is not proof texting to say that but rather to recognize that, if we believe the word became flesh then faith is dependent upon our use of language to convey it and what language we use is important which is why we are committed to inclusive language in our worship and communications. In the pre-literate society of the first century of the Common Era, people listened and learned from the stories, the poetry of the day. Language offered pictures, visions and such were repeated and retold. However, there was the recognition that the language used had meaning and the listener had a responsibility to interpret such. And the word became flesh also recognized that the word lived in history, in a particular time and place and therefore would be interpreted in relation to that time and place.

Now this may be the most difficult thing for us or for many to understand that ours is a historical faith which means it is a living faith. The words we use to convey our faith are living because they are conveyed by living beings. Linguists tie themselves sometimes in philosophical knots trying to explain how meaning is conveyed in language. These symbols we call letters which form themselves into words are only made flesh when we find meaning in them and that meaning is tied to social, historical, economic, and theological foundations of the reader or hearer as well as the writer or speaker. The word becomes flesh in history and requires that we who believe that interpret what that means and how that is lived out in this time and in this place.

In this congregation, we seek to use inclusive language in worship and that is clearly stated in our bulletin each week. This year in addition, I would ask that we think about three words we use often in worship but I fear don't really think about – stewardship, evangelism, and spirituality- let's spend some time considering them.

Stewardship is so often limited to the fall and the campaign for donations to the church but as a word becoming flesh as part of our belief let's think about how it might be embodied.

Stewardship is how we use the resources in which we are involved. This society will soon begin or continue a debate regarding the stewardship of its wealth. How do we use our governmental resources and how much do we allocate for what? Think about this, in this society, rich in wealth but more importantly rich in medical knowledge, skill, and resources, people will die this year of diseases that go untreated because they don't have the financial wherewithal to pay for treatment. Is that good stewardship? This year this country will spend more on so-called national defense than almost all other countries in the world combined. Is that good stewardship? What does it mean to be participate with God in the stewardship of resources?

And if the word is to become flesh in this community what does it mean to do evangelism, to tell the story of God's presence here, now? Presbyterian congregations are dying but not because people find our doctrines, our policies too liberal or too conservative, to this or too that. No, our congregations are dying because our members are dying and not being replaced. Maybe that's a good thing because Presbyterianism had nothing relevant to offer in terms of witnessing to God's presence in the communities we serve. Or maybe we have ignored that the word becomes flesh when we dare to embody it and share it with the communities of which we are a part. What does it mean to witness to God's presence in Madison and how do we share it? What does evangelism mean and how are we to have it become flesh?

And lastly, what does it mean to grow spiritually? Are we struggling with what it means as a community to know and live such out? Is spiritual growth just something for those attenders of Blackhawk or do we really seek to reach beyond the material and grow in spirit that we might know the truth of God's presence?

“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us” – John's gospel challenges us to live out a presence of God which is involved in our lives. It is a challenge which calls us to respond to and live out the simple prayer “God be with me in my words and in my serving”. AMEN.