God Became What We Are

John 1:1-14

Steve Hollaway Harbor Church December 26, 2010

John Shea described how a little girl named Sharon told the Christmas story: She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them with slow solemnity, convinced every word was revelation. She said, "They were so poor they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat and they went a long way from home without getting lost. The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside the lady. They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass (hee-hee), but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lighted the roof. Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them. Then the baby was borned. And do you know who he was?" Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars. "The baby was God." And she jumped in the air, whirled around, dove into the sofa and buried her head under the cushion, which is the only proper response to the Good News of the Incarnation. [John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected* (Allan, TX: Argus Communications, 1977) p. 68.]

That *is* the most incredible thing about the whole story, isn't it? That the baby was God. Then that the man Jesus was God. How could God become a human being? But that is the central mystery of our faith—not a complication or something we can explain away; it's the stack pole around which we organize everything else we know about God.

John's gospel, which tells us that "the Word became flesh," is different from the gospels of Luke and Matthew from which we draw the traditional Christmas story. They tell the "up close and personal" stories we see in this nativity scene, the scenes that were acted out in the Christmas pageant. But John begins his gospel not with the details of the birth but with a poem about the meaning of what happened when Jesus came to earth. John tells the story as someone who has chewed on the gospel for a long time. Instead of giving us a close-up of the birth, John pulls his camera back, way back in space and time. He pulls far back from the earth, so that we see it as one speck in the darkness, so far that we see the world not as nation vs. nation but as a world over against God and the darkness. John pulls back in time, too, before all time, before creation, when the Son existed not as Jesus but as the Word, God's self-expression which was face to face with God. That long perspective enables John to see what we might miss in the upclose story. He sees in the coming of Jesus the arrival of light and he sees the glory of God revealed in this one person.

The evangelical writer Joseph Bayly expressed it in a poem:
Praise God for Christmas
Praise Him for the Incarnation
for Word made flesh.
I will not sing
of shepherds watching flocks
on frosty night
or angel choristers.
I will not sing
of stable bare in Bethlehem
or lowing oxen
wise men

trailing distant star with gold and frankincense and myrrh. Tonight I will sing praise to the Father who stood on heaven's threshold and said farewell to His Son as He stepped across the stars to Bethlehem and Jerusalem. And I will sing praise to the infinite eternal Son who became most finite a Baby who would one day be executed for my crimes. Praise Him in the heavens. Praise Him in the stable.

Praise Him in my heart.

Do you every think about that back story? About the eternal Son, the second person of the Godhead before he ever became a human being, as the apostle Paul recorded in a hymn, "who being equal with God thought equality with God not something to be grasped, but emptied himself"? At one point in time there was a Jesus Christ who was not yet Jesus Christ. He was altogether divine, God's self-expression, God's way of talking to himself which had become his way of talking to humans, what John calls "the Word," using a Greek term for the logic that runs the world, the organizing principle of the universe. That being who created everything and holds it all together became a human being, became flesh. There had to be a moment of choosing to leave one realm behind and enter another. Denise Day Spencer, the widow of the man known as "the internet monk" (Dave Spencer), wrote a poem (January 1999) about that choice which her husband posted:

He stands,
poised on the brink of two worlds:
One, land of eternal day,
the other, earth of mire and clay.
Behind Him,
legions of heavenly host,
bright faces covered, praising,
all chanting, voices raising.
Before Him,
chaos yawning, swift and deep,
known, yet unknown. Fear unfurling,
death and darkness churning, swirling.
He turns.
One last look at golden glory.

The Three part; He is now One.
The Father's voice says, "Go well, my Son."
He leaps
into the abyss.
His next memory will be a Mother's kiss.

to the object of its love.

Ever since my days of first learning Greek it has struck me that the Word *became* flesh. John does not say that the Word "took on" flesh, or robed himself in a body, or any such thing. He says that the divine actually *became* a human body. We call this the doctrine of the Incarnation. That "carn" in incarnation is from the Latin root meaning flesh, or meat—the same root as in carnivore or *chili con carne*. You could say "God became meat." Our minds boggle at how that is possible: how does the infinite narrow itself to a virgin's womb? How does the creative energy that made the world make itself into matter, into flesh and blood just like ours? But the more important question is *Why?* Why would the divine ever want to become small and weak and subject to the forces of evil? The answer is love, that love wants to make itself known

One of the most important defenders of the Incarnation in the early church was Athanasius, who helped formulate the Nicene Creed we recited earlier. He was the enemy of the theologian Arius who taught that Christ was the highest of creatures, who came into being sometime after God. Athanasius argues that in order for God to be able to change human nature, God himself—and not some lower being—had to become human. Famously he said, "He became what we are, that he might make us what he is." Listen to what he says about why God became flesh:

The Word visits the earth, where he has always been present, and sees its evil condition. He takes a human body, born of a pure virgin in whose womb he makes human flesh his own, in which to reveal himself, conquer death, and restore life. For this purpose, the incorporeal and incorruptible Word of God comes to our realm. But he was never far from us, because no part of creation has been emptied of his presence: he fills all things everywhere, while remaining present with his Father. But he humbled himself and came to show his love for us.

[The Incarnation of the Word by St Athanasius. Trans. by Rev. A. Robertson; Modernized, abridged and introduced by Stephen Tomkins.]

John's gospel assumes that we *needed* the Word to come into our world. We needed the Word because we needed God to reveal himself to us, to communicate with us. We couldn't figure it all out just by looking at creation. It wasn't even enough to have the Law and the prophets. We needed God to make himself known in a way we could understand. We needed *life* to come into the world because we were dead—we were like zombies who walked around but were dead on the inside; we were like Pinocchio, talking like real boys and girls but actually wooden, waiting to be made alive. We needed *light* to come into the world because we were sitting in darkness, even though we had become accustomed to the dark and scarcely remembered what day was like.

The opening of John's gospel says that God made himself known and brought life and light into the world by one means: by becoming what we are in the person of Jesus. In that one person there was light and life for the world. Many did not receive him; in fact, they rejected and killed him. But those who received him, who accepted the gift of knowing God through him, began to share in his life, that life which has the quality of heaven and the age to come.

What does the Incarnation say about God? That God loves us so much that God is willing to become one of us—not just to meet us halfway as a superhero but to come all the way down

and identify with the lowest, dying a criminal's death. But it also means that God loved us so much that he raised the now-human Jesus back to life and brought the human Jesus—not just his soul, but his resurrected body—into the Godhead, into the Trinity, to reign over the universe. So what does the Incarnation say about *us?* Not only that we are loved, but there is nothing fundamentally wrong with flesh, with being human. Being human is good. God became human and was in no way tarnished by evil. And it means that God understands us, having shared our existence, our sorrows, and death itself.

I came across a reflection on the Incarnation in a movie review this week. A guy named Richard Lindsay reviewed the movie *Howl* in which James Franco plays the Jewish beat poet Alan Ginsberg. The film is largely about Ginsberg's obscenity trial for publishing his poem *Howl*, but it includes a reading of the poem. The culture of shame of the 1950's which views the body and sexuality as evil comes through in the film. Ginsberg says that that we don't edit our conversations when we're talking to close friends. We talk about anything. Poetry is that kind of intimate conversation, he says, and you shouldn't "edit your conversation with your muse." Now listen to what the reviewer says:

A lot of people seem to be trying to pull the same thing with God—like if there *is* a being so intimate to life as to construct our bodies from the dust of the earth and give us breath and spirit, that being somehow doesn't know we think about sex or use the toilet. We seem to think when we show up on Sunday morning to sing hymns, our clean-scrubbed faces hide the notion that we could ever have [as Ginsberg wrote] "howled on [our] knees in the subway" and be "dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts."

Well the hiding game's not working. It's not working for God or for us, and it's not working for religion. What—in *God's* name—are we doing as religious people if we can't bring our whole selves before God as an act of faith? For Christians, if the idea of incarnation means anything, it's that God gets us. God gets our hunger, our anger, our lust, our hopelessness, our cowardice, our laziness in the face of injustice. God gets the thrill of creation, God gets the pleasure we take in our bodies, God gets the meeting of two or more souls in deep conversation. God gets the howl of fear and death, moaning forth in [quoting Ginsberg] an "eli eli lamma sabachthani saxophone cry." God gets us, and loves us. There is nothing we can hide, or need to hide. [www.poptheology.com]

The only thing I can say to that is *Amen*. In Jesus, God became one of us and lived among us, full of grace and truth. Merry Christmas.