

The Eternal Became Human, Full of Love and Faithfulness

John 1:14

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I want to think today about one verse which is at the heart of the Christmas story: John 1:14. In the old RSV I learned in school, it began this way: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” That is how John describes what happened beginning in Bethlehem. There is no nativity scene like the one displayed behind me here, there is no historical setting, just a theological accounting of what happened. John is not interested in what happened to the parents or the shepherds; he’s interested in what happened to God. In her commentary on John, Gail O’Day of Wake Forest says “The story of Jesus is not ultimately a story *about* Jesus; it is, in fact, the story of God” [*NIB*, p.524].

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” In using the term “Word,” John is using the Jewish idea that God created everything by means of his word, speaking it into being. But he’s also using the Greek/Stoic idea that there is an ordering principle of the universe, the reason, which holds everything together, that is called the *Logos*, the Word. Layered over that is the idea that Jesus is God’s way of communicating with us, as if God were speaking now not just in words but in a person who embodies his personality. That’s the way *Hebrews* starts out: “In times past God has spoken to us in many and various ways through his prophets, but now he has spoken to us in the form of his Son.”

The Word, John has said, existed before the world was made. Before there was time, the Word was with God and *was* God. So that eternal Being, the one later theologians called the Second Person of the Trinity, the co-creator and the one through whom everything holds together—that one became flesh.

The key word, I think, is *became*. The Eternal did not just put on human flesh as a costume for a brief time. The Eternal actually *became* the thing that some people think is at odds with the spiritual; a human body with all of its foibles, with the messiness of blood and sweat and excrement. Flesh in Latin is *carne*—where we get carnivore, or chili con carne—which obviously means “meat.” The eternal Creator entered time and transformed himself, shrank himself, focused himself into a piece of living meat like you or me. In doing so he honored flesh forever. In doing so he said unequivocally that being human is good. We remember at Christmas that God became a baby, that little red thing that comes out of the mother, so messy that you have to wipe off the waxy stuff and blood, screaming, wrinkled, maybe deformed from being squeezed through a narrow passage. If you were ever present at a childbirth other than your own, you remember. It was 25 years ago last Friday that Nathan was born. Sarah had been almost ten pounds, but Nathan was seven and he seemed so tiny and fragile but absolutely wonderful. God became little like that.

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote:

He who is without flesh becomes incarnate; the Word puts on a body; the Invisible is seen; the One whom no hand can touch is handled; the Timeless has a beginning; the Son of God becomes Son of Man....O strange conjunction! The Self-existent comes into being; the Uncreated is created. He shares in the poverty of my flesh that I may share in the riches of his Godhead.

In the play *Green Pastures*, which ran for many years on Broadway with an all-black cast, playwright Marc Connelly has a scene which shows the Lord anxiously looking out over the parapets of heaven, trying to decide what to do about the sinful situation on earth. Gabriel enters with his horn tucked under his arm. Sensing the Lord’s dilemma, he brushes his lips across the trumpet to keep the feel of it and asks, “Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?” “No, no,” said the Lord, “don’t

touch the trumpet, not yet." God continues to worry about the problem. Gabriel asks the Lord again what he plans to do. Will he send someone to tend to the situation? Who will it be? Gabriel makes some suggestions. "How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?" Without looking back at Gabriel, God said, "I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!"

John says that he dwelt among us. A more literal translation of the Greek would be that he "pitched his tent" among us, or "tabernacled" among us. For a Jew, the whole idea of tents refers to the period of living in the wilderness, where Yahweh revealed himself and guided them. And the Tabernacle was the tent in the middle of their camp where Moses would meet God, and the shining glory of the Lord would fill the tent so the people could see it glowing. So when John says that Jesus tabernacle among us and we beheld his glory, it means that God is revealing himself as he did in the old days, but not in a literal tent but in a person.

He dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Some translations attach "full of grace and truth" to the Word; others attach it to his glory, but it doesn't make a lot of difference. The important question is what John means by grace and truth. And here all the Jewish background of the gospel and the image of the Tabernacle and glory are going to help us. I always liked the sound of grace and truth, but it seemed kind of abstract and philosophical. In the gospel, they are of course Greek words, but they are a way of expressing in Greek a very old Hebrew way of describing God.

Let me take you back to the days of Moses in the Book of Exodus. You remember the people escaping from the Egyptians and slavery. Eventually they got to Mount Sinai and Moses received the Ten Commandments. Do you remember—from the movie maybe—what happened while Moses was up on the mountain? The people made a golden calf as an idol and worshipped it and partied around it. After that comes a critical moment which is not as familiar. In Exodus 33, Yahweh says to Moses, "Just leave here. I'll just take you and your family and give the Promised Land to you. I've had it with these people."

Moses used to meet God in a tent—the same language used when John says that the Word "tented" among us. A cloud would come down and Moses would talk to the Lord. Moses turned down the offer to have the Promised Land to himself, but he told the Lord that if he was going to lead the people he needed to know more about God. He wanted to see God directly, to see God's glory for himself.

So God—referred to as Yahweh in the story—said that he would make his goodness pass before Moses and he would proclaim his holy name Yahweh. But he told Moses that he could not see him directly. That would kill him. Here's what he would do. If Moses would go up on the mountain, the Lord would put him in a crevice in the rock and cover Moses with his hand. Then when his glory passed by, he would be protected. But even with those precautions, Yahweh said, "You can't see my face, but you can see my backside." What a story; you can't make this stuff up.

When the Lord proclaims his name, you get one of the key verses of the Old Testament, one which is quoted over and over in later books. When the cloud and the glory pass by, here is how God describes himself: "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

This is who God is above all: God is mercy, compassion, steadfast love, and faithfulness. Those last two, "steadfast love and faithfulness" become a pair of words that are used to describe Yahweh 33 times in the rest of the Bible. The first word is *hesed*, which means God's undeserved covenant love, his loyal love, his grace toward Israel. The second word is *'emet*, which means faithfulness or truthfulness. That word is used to describe a spring which is always reliable as a source of fresh water. When the two

words are used together, they mean that Yahweh is characterized by *hesed*, steadfast love that makes covenant promises, and *'emet*, the faithfulness to keep his promises.

One verse appears in three different psalms; I know it as a praise song by Third Day: "Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (36:5, 57:10, 108:4). Psalm 89:2 says, "I declare that your steadfast love is established forever, your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens." The most familiar occurrence of those two words is the end of Psalm 100: "The Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

When you take the Hebrew concepts of *hesed* and *'emet* and try to turn them into Greek, there are no exact equivalents. And what many scholars have noted is that John renders them by the words "grace" and "truth." Grace is the equivalent of that steadfast love which we do not deserve, which keeps drawing us to God and holding onto us. And "truth" here does not mean philosophical truth, but that God is true to his word; it is God's trait of keeping promises, his faithfulness. The very thing that characterized Yahweh in the Old Testament John now says are the things that characterize the Word when he becomes human in Jesus: steadfast love and faithfulness. That's why I love the way the New Living Translation renders John 1:14: "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness."

In Exodus, Moses could not see God's glory, but now John says "we have seen his glory, the glory of the Only One from the Father." That glorious one is, the same as ever, full of steadfast love and faithfulness. Yahweh, who abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness, has chosen to tabernacle among us in human form—and it is that tent, Jesus, in which we see God's glory revealed. When the first letter of John says that God is love, this is the kind of love he has in mind, *hesed*, steadfast love and mercy, which you can call *agape* or you can call *grace*.

So this is what happened when Jesus was born. It is not like Abe Lincoln being born in a log cabin, the humble origins of a great man. It is the Eternal One, the ground of our being and the power of love at work in the universe, making himself like us that he might save us. It is about God revealing himself again, this time not just in words but in a human person, to be steadfast love and faithfulness.

Bono, the lead singer for U2, returned to Dublin after a long tour to Japan and attended a Christmas Eve service. At some point in that service, although he was tired and seated behind a column where he could not see, Bono looked at the text from John and grasped the truth at the heart of the Christmas story: in Jesus, God became a human being. With tears streaming down his face, Bono realized:

The idea that God, if there is a force of Love and Logic in the universe, that it would seek to explain itself is amazing enough. That it would seek to explain itself by becoming a child born in poverty ... and straw, a child, I just thought, "Wow!" Just the poetry ... Unknowable love, unknowable power describes itself as the most vulnerable....I saw the genius of picking a particular point in time and deciding to turn on this ... Love needs to find a form, intimacy needs to be whispered ... Love has to become an action or something concrete. It would *have* to happen. There *must* be an incarnation. Love must be made flesh. [*Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas*, 2006, p. 139]

Paul Harvey used to tell the story on the radio every year about a skeptical man who, as his family got ready to go to the Christmas Eve service said, "You go on without me. Since I don't really believe that whole story about God becoming a man, I'll just stay home." The family left and he sat down to read the paper and enjoy the warmth from the fireplace. Then he heard a thump on the window. It wasn't long before he heard another thump and he went to see what was going on. He saw birds, looking for refuge from the snow, who kept flying into the window. He had compassion for them and went out to open the doors to his barn, hoping they would find refuge in it. But they would not go inside.

So he turned on the light. The birds still wouldn't go in. He tried to shoo them in, and the more he tried, the more frightened and distant they became. Finally he said to himself, *I need to let these birds know that I want to save them. I want to get them out of danger and into safety. If I could just become a bird for a moment...* About that time, he heard the church bells ring, and it suddenly made sense why God became a man.