

John 1:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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God with Skin

When our kids were little, we would gather most nights around some bible story book before we put them to bed. The kids were in and out of course. I'll never forget the day I looked at one of our kids and asked a question. They looked up at me, caught completely off guard. They blurted out "Jesus!". Good answer. :)

Turns out it's pretty good theology too.

The Gospel of John makes an astonishing statement that is easy to miss. God declares Jesus to be the "word made flesh," the divine and human coming together in one person. That is profound.

What does "word made flesh" mean? Let's decode it:

The word "word" in these readings, as you may have heard, was "logos," a popular First Century philosophical term. It might be translated as "logic" or shorthand for "here's why things are the way they are." And it's referring to Jesus. The logos, has put on flesh.

If the incarnation is true, it answers three critical questions:

1. "What is a human being supposed to look like?"

The answer: Jesus.

God became a human being in radical solidarity, joining us as us. leading Karl Barth to say, "among the attributes of God we must now include humanness."

God in Christ took on humanity in order to heal humanity. Something has gone deeply wrong with us. It's called people. Lions, hippos, raccoons always act like lions, hippos and raccoons. They are just fine, even if I wonder why raccoons? Why mosquitoes? Anyway.

Humans on the other hand, don't have the human thing down very well. We have become deeply wounded, profoundly sick. So God in Christ takes on humanity that he might heal our humanity. The saving work of Jesus doesn't begin in Jerusalem on Good Friday but in Bethlehem.

To restore the image of God within us. As Maximus the Confessor said, "In Christ we find the new and true way to be human."

Jesus is the image of what human beings are to be! If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. But also, if we want to know what a human being is to look like and how we are to live, because that is also the revelation of how we are to be human!

In junior high school, there was a godlike classmate named Wayne Peace. He could play any sport, he was bigger than anyone, and he was the most popular dude on campus. As a new seventh grader, I was looking to make my way in a new school. So, I imitated Wayne. The way he walked, talked, everything. We were getting dressed out for a basketball game one day and someone asked me, "Fred, why haven't you put on your shoes yet?" Wayne piped up: "Because he's waiting on me to put mine on!" EXPOSURE HURTS!

A Christian is someone who is deliberately attempting to imitate Jesus. The term "Christian" means "little Christ," originating in Antioch as a gentle mockery of those striving to emulate Christ. "Look at them, they are all trying to be like that Christ. They are little Christs" We don't enter into the fullness of salvation by praying a prayer but by actually following Jesus. "You are on a path that is wrecking you and this world. Follow me instead!" Jesus seems to say.

2. "What is God supposed to look like?"

The answer: Jesus

John is saying something profound: Jesus Christ, is a new way of knowing God and what God is like. John dares to say no one has ever seen God! He says this to a group of people who have all sorts of stories of their forefathers "seeing God." Abraham, Jacob, Isaiah, and the list goes on. Here's what John is saying: With Abraham, Moses and the Patriarchs, God BEGINS to make himself known to humanity. Israel's vocation is to be the entry point for divine revelation into the world. But John asserts this culminated in a Jewish baby named Jesus in Nazareth. All "sightings of God" now are subordinate to the "word made flesh."

When God is asked to explain God's self, here's God's answer: Jesus.

Jesus is God's explanation of God's self. Jesus is what God has to say.

When Jesus' disciples asked him to show them God, he told them, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The writer of Hebrews was as blunt as he/she could be: Jesus is "the exact imprint of God's very being."

God is like Jesus. So, what is Jesus like? He welcomes outsiders, offers hospitality to immigrants, prioritizes the poor, and approaches sinners with love. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, extend mercy, forgive abundantly, and show compassion to the harassed and helpless. He acknowledges the marginalized, challenges unjust structures, and grants dignity to outcasts. Through parables, he illustrates God's pursuit of the lost and readiness to embrace the repentant. In facing violence and injustice, Jesus responds with love, mercy, and forgiveness, perfectly revealing God's heart by confronting the world's sin this way: I forgive you. Jesus is what God is like.

3. What is life supposed to look like? God with us, we are never alone.

Immanuel means “God with us.” This does not suggest that God merely showed up or made a sudden entrance. Absolutely not. While the birth of Jesus undeniably altered human history, it did not create a new reality for God or humanity. Rather, it was a clear and emphatic restatement of a truth that has always existed: God has always been, and will always be, with us. There is no other place God could be.

God simply is with us, in us, through us, above, below, beyond, and beside us. God transcends every preposition and defies all boundaries. God has always been and will always be inseparably one with all creation.

The Incarnation, much like this time of year, does not make that truth more real. What it does is draw our attention, allowing us to see this truth more clearly and to cherish it more deeply. It invites us to relish and fully enjoy the profound reality of God’s ever-present “with-ness.”

We do not walk alone among the shadows of earth because God is Immanu El, God with us. In our brokenness, in our fullness, God is with us. God is with us when the bullets are flying, when the ground is shaking, when the planes are crashing, when the waters are rising, when the ship is sinking, when the winds are howling, when death is knocking, when the shadow of death stretches out and touches even Christmas. God is with us! God is with us when we are falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. God is with us when we are raped and tortured and murdered. God is with us when our children, our precious children, are stolen from us. God is with them in their fear and horror! God is with us in our rage and sorrow and grief! God is with us! God is with the suffering and the dying, comforting and accompanying through that valley of death that we cannot yet enter. This is the Gospel, not that we’re untouchable, not that we’re inviolable, for even the Son of God was violated. But that we are never alone, never forsaken, never absent from the Divine presence is the Gospel of light and life.

-- The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D., Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas

Why is this so important?,

Because you will never give your will and your life over to any other God except a loving and merciful one who never leaves nor forsakes. Who knows the struggle of walking through this veil of tears that is our actual lives, who is a priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses. Why would you? (And maybe that’s why you haven’t!) But now that you know, that God is like Jesus and is always with us. why would you not?

Amen.