

## The Wonder Of The Incarnation

Psalm 42:1-2; John 1: 1-5, 14, 16, 18.

The Psalmist expresses our longing to see God, to see God face to face:

“As a deer longs for flowing streams,

so longs my soul for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God?”

It is the quintessential Advent psalm, these lines from Psalm 42. We long to see God’s face, to know the One who made us, the One, to quote Paul, who was quoting the Greek philosophers, “in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17: 28). Our own Christian faith is based on the belief that in the coming of Jesus we see the face of God, God’s face and God’s character.

### I

The prologue of John’s gospel tells the story and the wonder of the Incarnation, God becoming bone of our bone, flesh our flesh.

As John begins, we can begin to hear the music, like the music at the beginning of 2001 Space Odyssey. Or the beginning of The New World Symphony:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and was God.”

A more Hebraic way of saying it would be: “In the beginning was the Speaking of God.” John is echoing the beginning of Genesis where God brought the world into being by speaking it into being: “And God said...” and it was so!

And this Word “was with God and was God!” John says, “and all things were made through this Word, this Speaking, and without this Word, this Speaking, “was not anything made that was made.”

The book of Proverbs tells the same story, but instead of the word Word, the word is *Hochma*, Sophia in the Greek, the Daughter of God! In Proverbs 8:22-31, Sophia, Daughter Wisdom tells her story as God’s delights there at the beginning of creation. In the beginning was Sophia, and Sophia was with God and was God! And the Daughter of God became flesh and dwelt among us in a Son, Jesus of Nazareth! (That may boggle our gender constrained minds!)

Now the climactic verse, verse 14: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” Those words, not dulled by many hearings of it, should make our skin tingle a little, our hearts beat a little faster, God poured into our human flesh! Then the final words, if you hadn’t gotten the message yet “No one has ever seen God: the only son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” Fathers have bosoms too, that hold the children close.

Last week we heard about God traveling with the Hebrew people through the wilderness. As they hauled the movable tabernacle with them God’s presence

filled the tabernacle wherever they traveled. In verse 14, John is saying that God has come to “tent” with us, “tabernacle” with us—that’s the meaning of the word—in Jesus. Where we go, God will go with us, be present with us, abide with us, take up abode in us. That’s the first message of this text. We can be the tabernacle of God.

## II

A second meaning is this: that in Jesus we meet what some have called the *Cosmic Christ*. Richard Rohr among others has written about this. The Cosmic Christ is the one that has been with God from the beginning, in whom, through whom, for whom the world was made. The universe is “Christic”.

What could this mean? John was hinting at it when he used the Greek word for Word: Logos. For the Greek philosophers it meant the organizing principle of the universe which held and holds the world together, the Truth of all existence. The Cosmos Christ means that Christ transcends Jesus! Different religions call this Christ-presence, the Christ way, by different names: Buddhism calls it the Dharma. Taoists in China call it the Tao. God made the world in the shape of Christ. Christ is our origin and our destiny as a human race, and is the origin and destiny of the Universe.

In the beginning was the Word, the Speaking, the Sophia, the Dharma, the Tao. Scientists might say, In the beginning was Energy! And Energy was with God and was God. Energy was in the beginning with God and the world was made through Energy. How big is your Christ? Larger, deeper, broader than our minds can grasp. It is a wonder! The Christ is present everywhere. We Christians don't own Christ, though we try!

Christ is not Jesus' last name. The word is the Greek word for the Hebrew word *Messiah* and Messiah means *Anointed One*. God has been anointing the world forever.

### III

And the wonder grows as we are told that this wonder became "flesh", became a human being and dwelt among us in Jesus. Because of the Incarnation we have to look our own human-ness in a new way. We were made in Christ's image. Eastern Orthodox Christianity from its beginning has had a better hold of this than we in Western Christianity. One early Eastern theologian said: God became human that humans can become divine, and by divine we mean partaking of the divine nature.

A key verse in Eastern Christianity comes from 2 Peter: "God's divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life" that we may "become partakers of the divine nature! Hang with me here! Partaking in the divine nature

means partaking in the divine love. Not *more* than human, but most fully human!

God wants for us to be gloriously human. In the second century early theologian Irenaeus said: “The glory of God is the human being fully alive!” The first great heresy of early Christianity, Marcionism, said that God could not have created the material world because the material, fleshly world was evil. God created only the spiritual realm! So this heresy threw out the Old Testament and excised the NT passages that suggested that God had anything with the earthly realm, the fleshly realm.

One of these excised passages was ours today from John. God could have nothing to do with flesh, our flesh! The heresy is alive today in what some call a “dis-incarnate” Christianity!”, a form of Christianity that ignores the realm of the body and the earth, considering them as “immaterial” (pun intended) to the Christian faith. This form of Christianity ignores the goodness of creation and our own created goodness—and it leads to the desecration of the earth as well as the hatred of our own bodies.

America’s most famous monk, Thomas Merton, had this epiphany while standing at a street corner in Louisville. There is a bronze placard at that same corner today, marking his words.

“ In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the middle of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I

loved these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers....I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the human race, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate....now I realize what we really are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of convincing people that they are walking around shining like the sun.”

Last week, speaking of the spiritual practice of awe, I said one way to experience awe is to look at the moral beauty of others. Spiritual writer Cole Arthur Riley writes:

Wonder includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own. It allows us to jettison the dangerous belief that things worthy of wonder can only be located on nature hikes and scenic overlooks. This can distract us from the beauty flowing through us daily.

God has not made us to be little gods, but to be fully, gloriously human, to be like the Jesus we follow. Paul wrote that we, beholding the Lord, are being changed day by day, degree by degree into Christ's likeness. Love's likeness. In his hymn, "Love Divine All Love's Excelling", Charles Wesley sings it: "changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place." We become what we behold. Can we begin to believe that? As we follow him, we are being changed.

Dorothy Day was one of our modern saints. She did not like being called a saint because she said she didn't want to be so easily dismissed! After a mid-life conversion to the way of Jesus she led the Catholic Worker movement that served the poor in NY City and beyond. Near the end of her life in an interview with Robert Coles, she reflected on trying to answer his question:

“I just sat there and thought of our Lord, and his visit to us all those centuries ago, and I said to myself that my great luck was to have had him on my mind for so long a time in my life.”

That visit of Jesus to us is the wonder of the Incarnation. And what great luck we have had to be able to have had him on our minds for so long. It may have made a bigger difference than we know.

#### IV

Now back to John's prologue. If we all long to see God's face, to know God's true name, that is, God's true character, what does the word becoming flesh in Jesus help us know? Look how he lived, befriending the weirdo, outcast and sinner, making love his aim in everything, refusing to retaliate when opposed and cursed, bringing the children near. He was Love Incarnate. And Grace incarnate. So John concludes: “And from his fullness we have received grace upon grace upon grace.” That's it! The name and face of God is Love. And it's all grace, all gift. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that Jesus is God's Yes to us, not “Yes and No”,

Yes. Not “Yes, *But*”, not “Yes, *If*”. Those are the ways we turn the good news into not so good news. It is Yes! Always, forever, Yes!

In George Bernanos’ classic, *Diary Of A Country Priest*—I’ve told you this before, it is a keystone for me—the last words of the book and of the priest looking over his long life are : “All is grace.” Grace is all! Grace upon grace upon grace. It may take our entrance into heaven to fully recognize the wonder of it—as Paul, said, “now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face!”. But I hope we glimpse it now, even this Advent, even today. Grace upon grace upon grace upon grace....