

The Deeper Truth of Incarnation

Text: I John 1: 1-4, 4: 7-8; John 1: 1-5, 14-18

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Spring Lake, Michigan
December 22, 2002

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The title of the sermon this morning invites you to think with me about incarnation and the deeper understanding of it. It is not because I have discovered something about incarnation that is brand new. It is rather that I am recognizing more and more that the old familiar truth of incarnation has become so familiar to us that we fail to see, to understand its radicality and the revolutionary nature of the claim of incarnation. The eternal Word: “In the beginning was the Word,” John begins the gospel. Someone has translated that, “In the beginning was the Intention,” and I like that. The Divine Intention. There was something in the beginning, some intentionality in this whole creative process. So, in the beginning was the Divine Intention.

In the fourteenth verse that Divine Intention becomes flesh, human nature. The radicality of that claim is amazing. Luke tells us the story in a beautiful fashion, describing the birth of the child, the mother, the angels, the shepherds and all. But John had a philosophical bent of mind, and he sets this event in a vast cosmic context, reflecting on it philosophically or theologically. (You will be well advised to stick with the storytellers. Theologians are boring, but such is my lot.) So, it is John this morning. “The Word became flesh.” That is a radical claim.

All day long yesterday the house was filled with a marvelous aroma, and at suppertime Nancy served us bowls of *chili con carne*. We often speak about chili, but it is really *chili con carne*, and *con carne* comes from the Latin. *Con* is the preposition with, and *carne* is meat. We are, those of us who haven’t cleaned up our act and become vegetarians, carnivores, meat eaters, carnivorous. I love it. And I look like it. Carnival. You have never identified that word with chili con carne, but as a matter of fact, carnival is the *carni-valle*, farewell to red meat, farewell to meat. Carnival time is a time to let out all of the stops and get all that juice out of you because you are about to enter into a fast where you are going to be solemn and serious. And so *Mardi Gras*, a carnival, is a farewell to the flesh.

The incarnation means that what we really have to deal with is God *con carne*. It’s a little crass, but you should never forget it. Christmas is God *con carne*. Christmas is God with flesh on, the central truth expressed so powerfully in

John's gospel and reiterated in the letters of John which emanated from that Johannine circle. How could you make it any more concrete than those opening sentences of that first letter? "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen from our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands of the word of life." John was intent on expressing the fact that God has come to expression in human nature, in humanity, that the human is the embodiment of God, the enfleshment of God.

From time immemorial we have wanted some clue about God. Hasn't there always been that question in the depths of the human spirit—who is God? Where is God? What is God? What is the ultimate? Why is there something rather than nothing?

Certainly John knew that. In the fourteenth chapter we have that little conversation between Jesus and Phillip. Jesus has been talking about going to the father and Phillip says, "Well, Lord, just show us the father and we will be satisfied." Jesus says to him, "Phillip, have I been with you so long and you still don't get it? If you have seen me, you have seen the father."

Phillip, don't you get it? Here I am, God in your midst, the embodiment, the enfleshment of God in your midst. Phillip, you want to see the father, you want to understand the father, you want to know the clue to the mystery of that which is ultimate? Touch me. Look in my face, for I am the only God you will ever know, because the amazing claim of our gospel is that the eternal intention has become enfleshed in a human being.

In the eighteenth verse we read, "No one has ever seen God." Once again, there it is. You see, no one has ever seen God. But the only son has made God known.

As I have said before, someone has translated that in a rather marvelous fashion. The discipline we learn in seminary is the science of exegesis. You take a text and break it apart and open it up and try to explain it. You interpret it. That is what I am doing as we speak. Exegesis. It is an academic discipline which hopefully would prepare the preacher for opening the text for the people. That eighteenth verse—no one has seen God—has been translated by someone: The only son is the exegesis of the father. That is wonderful. The son breaks open the mystery that is God. So this is what Christmas is about. This is what the central act of Christmas is about—the embodiment, the enfleshment of God in the human.

"Ah," you say to me, "that is not a deeper understanding. That is the same old thing we have always heard." That's true. But let me remind you of what I have been circling around in these last weeks and last Advent season particularly. I cannot believe that I have lived all my life, Advent after Advent, and not recognized the contradiction—the conflict between the mirror of God in the incarnation and the mirror of God in the second coming. In Advent we so easily say that the one who came is coming again. And then it struck me that the image

of God that we have revealed in the life of Jesus from the crib to the cross, that life of obscurity and poverty, of humility, of grace, of compassion, the vulnerability of the child, the vulnerability of the one who was crucified, is a picture of God and we have claimed it. But how do we put it together with the God revealed in that one who will come again? The one who came in poverty and humility will come again in power and great glory? What is mirrored in the first coming contrasts with the God mirrored in the second coming.

It seems that the one who came in poverty and humility came from another realm into our realm, took temporary residence, took on flesh temporarily, and then left again, having accomplished redemption in order that we might be delivered from this realm into God's realm. There are two realms, a dualism, and the God revealed in that child, that God as vulnerable is still apparently above the fray and still in control and still calling the shots. But the God revealed in the child, in the vulnerability of the child, has given up on control. That God embodied in the human is the God who creates us in freedom, beckoning us to love in turn. And that is precisely the risk of love.

Love doesn't have any guarantees. If you have a world where might makes right, you can coerce and have your own way. If God runs the universe that way, then God can have God's way. But if God indeed emptied God's self, and if the Infinite has become concrete in the finite so that you can touch and handle a word made flesh, then that kind of vulnerability brings no guarantee. Love can be defeated. Love can be crucified. And the image of that God is quite other than the God who will move from the wings into the main stage and call down the curtain on history and execute judgment on the living and the dead. That God never gave up control. That God in Jesus remained "God" very much.

I am suggesting to you that the deeper understanding of incarnation may be that the God revealed in Bethlehem's child is the real genius of the Christian understanding, but that the Church couldn't live very long with a vulnerable God. What we want is a God who is strong and in control, the Lord God Almighty. Now just think about this with me, because I am plowing some new ground here and I am not at all sure. I am totally sure, however, that I do not have all the loose ends gathered up. But I am attempting to find a new way to think and speak about God as I see God revealed in Jesus and the incarnation and simply stop there, because I think a major distortion has occurred in the history of the church and it began very early. It began with that apocalyptic expectation in the immediate aftermath of Jesus, that apocalyptic vision that expected the heavens to open and God to come down and to wreak judgment on the world.

I am suggesting to you a deeper understanding of the incarnation in that the original intention was to say, "O my god, God is like that!" I am suggesting that the intention of the incarnation in the heart of the Christian proclamation was to portray a God of vulnerability, because that God would create the likes of us in freedom, beckoning us to love. It seems to me that the mistake the Church made

was to say that what happened in Jesus happened once for all, one for all, when as a matter of fact, the initial encounter with him by those who touched him, who looked upon him, who listened to him was to say, “My God!” and to realize that God was in the human. We are in this cosmic process of billions of years, the Big Bang, stars exploding, elements cooling, and planets forming in a most amazing fashion beyond our ability to fathom. It seems to me that the deeper understanding of the incarnation is that after billions and billions and billions of years, perhaps about three million years ago, life happened. Then maybe a million years ago something similar to human life began to form, and eventually it comes to the likes of us on the edge of the third millennium where we can sit in an assembly like this and think about billions of years and cosmic reality and star explosions.

Do you realize the amazing understanding that is ours, the privilege that is ours? We have come to a point where we are aware of that whole thing, aware of that whole process, learning more about it all the time, yet knowing very little about its deep mysteries except that we are the product of the process that has been underway. As we think about it, we human beings become the consciousness of the cosmos, we human beings become the awareness. The cosmos becomes aware in us. We human beings have a voice to praise and stand in wonder at the cosmos.

That is an amazing thing! And it seems to me the deeper understanding of the incarnation would be that the process goes along for billions of years and one day some creature wakes up and becomes aware to the point that we say, “There is a human being.” And the awareness continues to grow. The understanding of the incarnation I am suggesting claims that the Infinite, that Creative Spirit, however you wish to speak of the Ultimate Mystery, becomes concrete in the finitude of the likes of us. Finitude, matter which has spirit, matter which thinks and knows and understands and becomes aware—that is the miracle of Christmas, the coming into flesh of God. That is the concretization of the Creative Spirit in a form that you can begin to grasp.

The Church wanted to say all of that about Jesus, but only Jesus. And then the rest of us poor middling human beings trudge through this vale of tears waiting to be redeemed in order that we might be exited to another realm. Do you see the dualism of that traditional conception? God sends the Son, the Son takes up temporary residence in our flesh, and after the incarnation there is an ex-incarnation. The purpose of the incarnation was not to enable us to be the bearers of divinity, but rather to deliver us from our fallen estate. But we have missed the glory of it! We have missed the wonder of it. We sit around here waiting. We wait for the next act of God. We wait for the clouds to open and for God to speak in dramatic fashion and to right the wrongs and bring history to consummation. But that is not going to happen.

God has acted. God has become human. The human is the bearer of God. The incarnation is a reality, an ongoing reality. We are the extension of the incarnation. We cry out, “How long, O Lord, how long?” I suppose God would resoundingly cry, “How long? How long, indeed! When will you get it? You are it!”

I think the writer of that first letter had something like that in mind, for after the opening paragraphs of chapter one saying God is tangible in the flesh, in the fourth chapter he writes God is love. And he repeats that line from the gospel’s first chapter: “No one has ever seen God.” But then he adds content to it. He says that the one who dwells in love dwells in God and God dwells in that one. A few lines later, the one who abides in love abides in God and God in that one.

In other words, humanity is the bearer of divinity. And it is the one who has learned to love who is the one in whom that divinity dwells in full expression. Well, I shouldn’t say “full expression.” Let’s say tentative expression, or inadequate expression, perhaps flawed expression. But nonetheless, there was something about Jesus, the flesh of Jesus, the person of Jesus which caused those who saw him, who walked with him, who had an encounter with him to say, “My God!”

And that wasn’t the end. It was only the beginning. It wasn’t once for all and at one time and place, but true every place at all times. The whole process has been tending toward this. The whole cosmic process has been issuing in spirit, spirit marked by love, for God is love. The world lies in such darkness and there is such grief and pain, it is only in the midst of that darkness when the human embraces me that I can feel the embrace of God; when another looks into my eyes and says, “I care, I love.” Then I look into the face of God.

All that sounds like naive preacher talk, the kind of silly sentimental stuff you would expect at Christmas. Well, it’s your fault. You came to church at Christmas time. Sometimes I question myself about harping on this all the time, because someone might say to me, “Don’t you know there is a real world out there? Don’t you know how dark it is? You are saying that the human animal is a God-bearer? You are saying that the only God accessible, visible, tangible is the God enfleshed in the human?”

And I have to say, “Yes.” Because I believe that Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life and no one will ever experience the Ultimate Mystery except in the way of Jesus, which is the way of love, of self-emptying love. The deeper truth of the incarnation is the radicality of the divinity in humanity that is crying to come to expression.

But we can’t live with that for very long. Then it’s in our hands, it is up to us. Then we have to change the world. Once in a while I just smile at myself ranting on like this in such naive fashion, except that the real naiveté is to think that the

kingdom will come in any other way, that it will come through power or might or glory, that it will come with the exercise of muscle, that we can establish once and for all freedom and justice.

No. Fear controls and power coerces. Love transforms.

Once in a while I get a fax on Sunday night. This one said, “Dick, following is a bit of verse that fits with your sermon this morning. I believe the original stimulus was one of your Wednesday evening Advent messages a year ago. You will also find a number of thoughts borrowed from your sermons.”

What if we loved one another?

What if we Christians, Muslims and Jews loved one another?

What if we Christians, Hindus and Buddhists loved one another?

What if we Christians, Confucians and agnostics loved one another?

What if we evangelicals, fundamentalists, and liberals loved one another?

What if God's people of all faiths loved one another?

Would we miss the illusion of superiority?

Would we miss the exhilaration of judging others?

Would we miss the view from higher moral ground?

Would we miss the thrill of killing them with swords or words?

What if we white and black loved one another?

What if we black and yellow loved one another?

What if we yellow, red and brown loved one another?

What if we Europeans, Asians, Africans and Latinos loved one another?

What if God's children of every color and nation loved one another?

Would we miss the illusion of superiority?

Would we miss the exhilaration of judging others?

Would we miss the view from the higher moral ground?

Would we miss the thrill of killing them with swords or words?

What if we old and young loved one another?

What if we single or married loved one another?

What if we without academic degrees loved one another?

What if we straight and gay loved one another?

What if we female and male loved one another?

What if we blue collar and white collar loved one another?

What if God's daughters and sons of every label loved one another?

Would we miss the illusion of superiority?

Would we miss the exhilaration of judging others?

Would we miss the view from the higher moral ground?

Would we miss the thrill of killing them with swords or words?

September 11th showed us what love's absence can do. The days after have shown us what happens when love is activated, superiority stifled by the quiet but tireless power of humility, judgment overruled by the celebration of diversity that enriches us. Higher ground was held only by those tired, dusty heroes who emptied themselves in service, blood-red battlefields transformed into green meadows of mercy and healing.

What if we loved one another? What if we started with simple respect? What if we humans become what we are intended to be? Would God's people of all faith languages worship in unison? Would God's children of every color compose one picture? Would God's daughters and sons of every label celebrate as siblings? Would we then finally understand the meaning of incarnation? Of God with us? Of God in us? Of human divinity?