

The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Day
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98;
Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12]; John 1:1-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Maurice Lamouroux has a website where he has assembled famous paintings of Biblical stories according to Biblical theme. On the theme of the birth of Jesus, Lamouroux has 500 paintings that depict Jesus' infancy. Those Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke are highly picturesque; they can be visualized and painted. Then, the author of this website lists John 1:1-14, the Christmas story from the Gospel of John. How many paintings of Jesus' birth, do you think, are based on John 1:1-14? Another 500? No, not one. Not one. Not one painter has been inspired to attempt to paint the Christmas story according to the Gospel of John. Why? Could it be that John's Christmas story is too abstract, too philosophical, and too mind numbing.

But wait; there is a granite column on which just such an attempt has been made. It is to be found on the portico of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, though the fields have turned into London's Trafalgar Square. That nondescript granite column presents John's story in a most dramatic way. Its focus is on the heart of this morning's Gospel, the word made flesh dwelling among us. Of course, John's understanding of the flesh was the ancient understanding which saw flesh as more than skin and bones. Why, flesh referred not to particular body parts but to the whole body, the totality of the person so embodied. Out of which was developed the ancient understanding of the human being as body, mind and spirit. It is a way of thinking about ourselves which we still use to this very day. So it was the God became fully human. God did not remain aloof, distant, far removed from us avoiding the evil and suffering of earth. Far from it, God entered fully into human life on earth with all of its rough and tumble. God came among us to join us and as a result suffered as we do.

No longer can we say that our God could not understand what it's like to struggle against the cold, to have to flee to another country, to be betrayed by a friend, to grieve the loss of a loved one, to fear suffering and or death. No, our God has truly walked our walk; God's Word of Love has truly taken flesh. And the words of Jesus took flesh as well. He didn't just say, "I love you," to Zaccheus, but called him down from his tree top, offered friendship and sat at dinner with him. Jesus not only spoke of a God of mercy and forgiveness, but extended that forgiveness to a frightened, shamed woman standing alone with a pile of stones left about her, and to his friend Peter at a second charcoal fire. Jesus not only spoke of God's Kingdom of justice, but he stood in solidarity with the poor and the outcasts. He not only spoke of a God who longs for our wholeness, but he touched a leper to clean skin, a stooped woman to straightness. He not only said, "I love you," to the hungry crowd, but fed their hungers with truth and with bread. He didn't just say, "I love you," to each of us, but picked up a cross, suffered, died our deaths, and rose that we might know life eternal.

Now that God has, in fact, become a human being, it means that we humans can understand more fully that God understands us. Surely, it must also mean that none of our experiences are strange to the Holy One, because God has chosen to share the human condition with us. There is no longer a remote sense that God is above and outside us, but there is this incredible sense that God understands from within what it's like to be a human being, to struggle as we have to struggle and, therefore, can give us grace to help in our times of trouble.

This has been so perfectly expressed in a play written by a German Lutheran pastor, Guenter Rutenborn. The play was written in 1945 as Germany was reeling from the impact of the terrible World War II, and Pastor Rutenborn is trying to struggle with the question that was on so many people's minds, who was responsible for the terrible agony that the world had experienced through World War II. And so the play begins with a group of refugees, displaced persons, milling around, asking who's to blame, and the various answers that were in the air were voiced there. Some said Hitler was to blame; others said, "No, it was the munitions manufacturers who financed him." Others said it was the apathy of the German people, but then suddenly a man comes up out of the crowd and says, "Do you want to know who is really to blame for all the suffering we've been through? I'll tell you. God is to blame. He is the one that created this world. He is the one who has let it be what it is." And everybody catches up the chorus. They turn with one voice to say, "God is to blame. God is to blame." And so in the play, God is brought down on the stage and is put in the dock, and God is tried for the crime of creation. He is found guilty and the judge says, "The crime is so severe that there are going to have to be the worst of all sentences. I hereby sentence God to have to live on this earth as a human being." And the three archangels are given the task of carrying out the sentence.

The first archangel walks to the end of the stage and says, "I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to be obscure and to be poor. He will be borne in the depths of no where with a peasant girl for His mother. There will be a suspicion of shame about his birth, and He will have to live as a Jew in a Jew-hating world."

The second archangel starts out and says, "I'm going to see to it when God serves his sentence that He knows what it's like to fail and to suffer disappointment. No one will ever understand what He is trying to do."

The third archangel said, "I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to suffer. I'm going to see to it that He has all kinds of physical pain. At the end of His life, He's going to be executed in as painful a way as possible."

And with that the three archangels disappear. The houselights go down, and it suddenly dawns on you that God has already served that sentence. He knows what it's like to live as a human being, which means there's nothing you face today that is going to be strange to God.

Therefore, the great message of Christmas is that God became what we are, so that we could understand better what God is, and we could believe with all our hearts that God understands what we are, and this has got to be Good News!

Just so the granite column. People tend not to notice it until they are leaving the church. There it is solidly between them and their view of bustling Trafalgar Square. At the base of a column is a step that just begs you to step up on it and see.....The top of the column carved out in a concave fashion like a large bowl in which nestles a fetal boy babe with cord still attached to the placental wall. The reactions of those who take the step vary from smiles to deeply furrowed frowns. But to step down, the step is such that one has to look down in order to see where to step. It is then that the eye catches the engraved text which wraps around the column. So people bow down and follow the text which simply reads. "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us..."

A gift. A gift of God Himself for us. A gift to be given. A gift to be passed on.

Just so, many years ago a monk found a precious stone, a precious jewel. A short time later, the monk met a traveler, who said he was hungry and asked the monk if he would share some of his provisions. When the monk opened his bag, the traveler saw the precious stone and, on an impulse, asked the monk if he could have it. Amazingly, the monk gave the traveler the gem. The traveler departed quickly, overjoyed with his new possession. However, a few days later, he came back, searching for the monk. He returned the stone to the monk and made a request: "Please give me something more valuable, more precious than this stone. Please give me that which enabled you to give me this precious stone!"

Lord give us the power and exhort us, to give ourselves to others just as God in Christ has given Himself to and for us.

Amen.