

**“In the Flesh”**  
**Text: Luke 1:39-45**  
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*...and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Luke 1:42b*

At Christmas, even the most introverted person imaginable can be spotted standing by a punch bowl exchanging greetings with the pourer of the punch. At Christmas, people like and need to get together.

Whether or not you can carry a tune, you find yourself in a crowd around a piano singing “Joy to the World”, “Away in a Manger”, “Silent Night.” We attend cocktail parties and cookies swaps. We join in the throngs at the airport or drive bleary-eyed through the night to be with “our people” for the holidays. I’m convinced that this instinct to be with those we love and care about does not originate in the human heart, but rather in the heart of God. “Emmanuel” is the Hebrew word for “God with us. Incarnation is the theological word, the word that names “the central, blazing core of the gospel: that God became flesh and dwelt among us.” (1) Shirley Guthrie, the noted theologian, once wrote, “The birth stories of Jesus remind us that God is with us not in the sense of a beautiful idea or an abstract truth. It *happened* at a particular time, in a particular place, in connection with a particular mother:

‘In the days of Herod the king’  
‘In Bethlehem’  
‘Of Mary.’” (2)

The real presence of God on earth is the heart and the soul of the Christian story.

A new poll is out, one done by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life. The study finds that a large number of Americans engage in multiple religious practices, and that they mix elements of various traditions, not only in their practices but in their beliefs. For example, 22% of people who identify themselves as Christians say that they believe in reincarnation. (3) Now, the Christianity that has been around for 2000 years knows nothing of reincarnation. Incarnation, yes. God was in Christ. Resurrection, yes. Christ rose from the dead and in doing so, defeated death for us all. Resurrection, incarnation, but not reincarnation. Those of you who've heard me preach across the years know that I have genuine respect for other religions of the world, but Christianity, in many crucial ways, differs from other religions of the world. Eastern religions particularly are what one might call world-denying; whereas, (to use Albert Schweitzer's famous phrase) Christianity is “the most world affirming” of all religions. Christianity teaches that God did not shun the flesh and things of this world but became flesh; therefore, these bodies of ours and the faith community that we call the Body of Christ are themselves not to be shunned, but to be honored as the locus of the presence of the Living God. Other religions might treat the realms of earth as that from which our souls must be freed, but

Christianity teaches that the realms of nature and human history belong to God, have been created and sanctified by God. Now that Christ is come, this world is where we will find God going about the work of salvation.

The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once wrote, "Christianity is the most materialistic of all the religions in the world." Think about that. Think about the sacrament we just celebrated. Ordinary water, exactly the same kind of water that Locke Attwood takes his daily bath in – became today the living water of his redemption.

Bread baked in someone's oven becomes the bread of heaven, the body of our Lord broken for us.

C.S. Lewis put it perfectly when he cautioned, "Remember, it's no good trying to be more spiritual than God." The birth of Jesus reveals God's love for *this* world and its inhabitants. Knowing the human race as well as I do, I don't know why God felt this way, but God did not want to live without us and does not want us to live without God. At Christmas, we celebrate the divine decision, implemented 2000 years ago, that through a young girl, in an occupied country, a baby would be born, and he would be called "the Son of the Most High, and of his kingdom there would be no end."

You might say that the original Christmas party actually took place in a little house on a Judean hillside. Mary - pregnant - went to see Elizabeth - pregnant. They got together at Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth's son, a miracle baby like Mary's, would be named John; we would call him "John the Baptist". When he grew up, his purpose in life would be to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Messiah. As a consequence of his fidelity to his calling, his life would be short and difficult. The same for Mary's baby. But that day in that little house, the baby leapt for joy in his mother's womb, even as his mother blessed the baby in Mary's womb. C.S. Lewis tries hard to wrap words around the great mystery of the incarnation: "The eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe became not only a human, but before that, a baby. . . "(5) Divine majesty is displayed in self-chosen vulnerability. This is the unique claim of the story we have to tell: the invasion of God into the real world, coming as everyone else who's ever come into the world - being born from a mother's womb - in answer to the longing of the people that "envy, strife, and discord cease," but coming mainly because God loves us and couldn't stand to be away from us, wanted to be with us, and not just for a little bit, but all the way, all the way to the cross and beyond.

The profound implications of the incarnation are largely ignored this time of year, but it still behooves us to take a minute or two on the Sunday before Christmas to reflect on the meaning of the incarnation. I like Santa Claus and reindeer and roast turkey and mulled cider, but this is not all Christmas is about. Christmas is

about the God of mercy putting himself at *our* mercy, a tremendously great reversal.

Mary, in her song called the “Magnificat,” outlines the consequences of such an upside down action on the part of the Almighty: The proud will be scattered. The hungry will be filled, the rich sent empty away, not because God doesn't like rich people, but God loves rich people enough that he wants them to be spared from having their hands so full of their own plans and their own things that they cannot receive the gift of God's future. Think of riches, not only in terms of money, but in terms of what a person has a lot of: Talent, ideas of your own, or whatever. You can be so filled with yourself and what you have accomplished, there is no room anywhere inside of you for the life-giving Spirit of God to renew and refresh and replenish your life.

If you listen to Mary's song, you can't miss its focus on God's concern for this world and for the least and the lost and the left out in it. I know a person of great means who is devoting all his time and energy these days to the education of primary school-age children in the country of India, for no good reason other than it's the right thing to do. In the concreteness of life, the kingdom comes.

God had a choice about coming in the flesh. You and I didn't; for us, it was either flesh or nothing. Early in the life of the church, an “other-worldliness” kind of theology threatened to take over - Paul had a hand in it; if you read Galatians, he's really down on the flesh and high on the spirit. But Gnosticism, as this tendency is called, that is, labeling spiritual things good and everything else bad, never has gotten too strong a foothold in our tradition. I think the Christmas story helps immensely in that regard.

For instance, where is Jesus born? He is born, legend has it, in a stable. Stables are places where smelly, breathing, hoof-clomping, hay-munching, noise-making animals live and do whatever it is they have to do. A stable becomes the maternity ward. And the baby who is born? The baby is like any baby you've ever known. He needs to be burped and changed. Don't you doubt the day will soon come when he will wear Mary and Joseph down to nub when he cries out in the middle of the night.

Jesus was fully human, fully God; his divine nature did not trump his human nature. He lived a truly human life laughing, crying, eating, sleeping, suffering, enduring the same kinds of losses and frustrations to which we are all subject. In the end, he died as we all will do. What did the Psalmist say? *All flesh is grass*, including the flesh of the Son of God. His work was not to redeem us from our flesh, but in our flesh. (6)

I apologize for giving the Apostle Paul a little knock a minute ago, but I'll say something nice about him here. He was the first to use the phrase “Body of Christ.” The Word made flesh in Christ takes on our flesh now. What a thought!

Teresa of Avila wrote in the 16th century:  
Christ now has no body but yours  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours –  
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion at the world.  
Yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good. Yours are the hands –  
yours are the hands with which he goes about blessing the world now.

A couple of weeks ago I had three experiences, all in a row, one in the evening, two the next morning. It was babysitting night at Morningside Church, Melinda Sandkam's wonderful Christmas gift to our parents. Seventy or seventy-five kids were here. As I was leaving, one of our members was coming in to help with the activities of the evening. I knew that she, a schoolteacher, had been with little kids all day. I asked her, "What time did you get up this morning?"

She said, "Don't ask what time I got up."

I said, "Okay. What time did you get to work this morning?"

She answered, "Quarter to seven."

I said, "You must be exhausted. I can't believe you're here."

She said, "Melinda needs me, and hey, it's Christmas!"

The next morning, as I brought Al's and my pan of pork and beans for Common Ground, who should pull up beside me but a new, young father who has many responsibilities. He's patting the baby and gathering up his aluminum pans in the back seat of the car. He's in the parking lot because he cares about people he doesn't even know having a hot meal on a Tuesday afternoon.

Then, there was the decorating squad. Lord have mercy! Countless people "of all walks of life," as they used to say. Among the more memorable sights of the morning was a grandmother in a pink turtleneck and puffy coat standing on a ladder in a very precarious position - a broken hip would be a disaster, but there she was, making sure the garland over the back door hung just right. *The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.* The Word that became flesh in Christ is flesh in us now.

I love the old Advent story about the New York taxi cab driver who was worried about all the homeless people on the streets in Manhattan. He prayed to God, asking what he could do. The Lord said, (I wish God would talk to me this way because then I could take notes and be all set!) to the cab driver, "Make eight pounds of spaghetti. Take it downtown to the corner of 103rd and Broadway. Give supper to anyone who comes and is hungry. Ask no questions. Insist on no conditions." (7)

The cabbie made the spaghetti and took it downtown. The people came and feasted. Now, every time the cabbie has a day off, he makes spaghetti. His life has meaning. These are the ways God continues to set the world straight again.

I close with this. I've thought about Elizabeth and Mary at their little Christmas party, their babies jumping and all kinds of things going on, and how they might take a minute to jot a few words down for Morningside Church, as we face a future that will be different from the past. What they might want to say to us? Perhaps these things:

Let joy mark your journey, never anxiety. God can be trusted with the future.

New possibilities will be born here, if you have the good sense to receive them.

Don't ever get overwhelmed by circumstances. Mary had every reason to be overwhelmed, but she fought that temptation, and she became the means by which God's purposes took on flesh and bone for the sake of the world. Morningside is not a rich and famous bunch. We are not at the top of any heap; neither was Mary. But she was *just the one* God needed.

Finally, I think the ladies would say: Take a page from Mary's songbook and live into your true calling. Churches that comfort the comfortable are a dime a dozen, but a church that challenges the comfortable and makes a brave, compassionate witness to the transforming power of God is almost as rare as a virgin mother. But churches like that do exist. They're the ones who make all the difference in the world. Now.

(1) Deborah Smith Douglas, "The Poverty of God," *Weavings*, November/December 2003, p.9.

(2) Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, John Knox Press, 1968, p.227-228.

(3) "Pew Forum: Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths" 12/9/09.

(4) Luke 1:32.

(5) *Mere Christianity*.

(6) William H. Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, October, November, December, 2009, p.51.

(7) Walter J. Burghardt, *Advent*.