

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
December 6, 2009 (2nd Sunday of Advent)
John 1:1- 5, 10-18
“An Advent Quartet: John’s Promises”

Beethoven composed a beautiful melody for the second movement of this piano sonata. It is simple and lyrical. However, its beauty fails if the melody is played without its accompaniment. It is the underlying harmony, the broken chords, and the occasional notes of dissonance that make the melody so effective. I suppose that is true of every great composition or piece of art or work of poetry. Beautiful things depend on other things to be beautiful.

The same thing can be said about the Prologue to John’s gospel – the opening verses of chapter one with its poetry about the grandeur of God revealed in God’s Son, Jesus, the Word made flesh. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.* This description of creation, where all things came to be through the Word of God, is dependent on another creation story, that of Genesis 1 in which the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters until God spoke and created life.

Like a melody with an ever-changing accompaniment, John’s poetic images then take a surprising turn by talking about heaven in terms of earth, talking about God in terms of you and me. Listen. *The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.* We are not only included in this story; we are the story. The poetry says the Word became flesh, but the subject of the poetry is us – the Word lived among us, the Glory has been seen by us. That’s the real beauty and power in this gospel prologue.

If any of you were raised in the Catholic church when the mass was spoken in Latin, you’ll remember what you did when the priest recited the Nicene Creed and said the words, “et incarnatus est.” In hearing the creed describe how Jesus was incarnated, how he was made flesh, you were supposed to make a profound bow. Not a genuflection or a subtle nodding of the head, but bowing down so that your eyes moved from the altar to the floor and back again. Granted, it’s not a very Presbyterian thing to do, but think about it. “Incarnatus” – God took on flesh to fully know what we feel and think and believe. It’s a staggering thought – a profound thought. Something powerful enough to bow us down or knock us to our knees.

But we preachers have been doing you a disservice if the only time we read John’s Prologue during Christmas Eve services. How often have you heard these words at candlelight services: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God; and the Word became flesh and lived among us.* In doing so on Christmas Eve, we permanently link incarnation with a baby lying in a manger. God coming as a child – an important and amazing and profound idea. But this poetic text says much more than that.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. The Greek word used here is *skenoo*, which means to dwell or tabernacle with someone. To understand the first lines of John's prologue, you have to know the creation stories of Genesis. To understand the middle lines of John's prologue, you have to know the stories of Exodus. When the Hebrew people were rescued from Egypt, God was with them as they wandered – as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. After receiving the Ten Commandments, they constructed a tent or a tabernacle in which God's glory accompanied them on their journey. Where they walked, God walked. Where they rested, God rested. This tabernacle image from the Old Testament is now brought forward into the New Testament. The Word and Glory of God became flesh and lived, tabernacled, with us here on earth.

When Jesus is called "Emmanuel," meaning "God with us," we are meant to take that as a present tense verb. God is with us – tabernacling with us, pitching a tent wherever we travel in our lives; right there on the front lawn under the stars, anxious to greet us at sunrise the next morning and continue beside us wherever our journey leads. John's gospel was not interested in a Christmas day, "Away in a Manger" kind of incarnation. John stressed that this is an "each and every day" kind of incarnation. A Psalm 139 "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" kind of incarnation. Now, why am I stressing this? For two reasons. First, if God for you is only incarnate in the baby Jesus on Christmas morning, then your faith is built around a once-a-year tableau, lovingly captured on cards and in crèche scenes, but something that is packed in boxes for most of the year. But if God is incarnate as one who tabernacles with us, then your faith is built around a promise, that the eternal One, the Logos of Life, is right here with us always. Always. Always.

The second reason is a little more complicated. Many years ago, an old friend of mine and I took a trip to the Grand Canyon, where we stayed in the park campsite for several days. On my first day there, I heard a ranger tell someone that the best place to view the sunrise over the canyon was about a ½ mile along the trail to a particular lookout point. He went on to say that despite giving this advice to hundreds of tourists, almost no one took him up on his recommendation. I found that hard to believe, and vowed the next morning to do what he said. Now to get to the lookout point before sunrise meant I had to set my alarm and hike a reasonable distance in the dark. But I made it to the spot, and sat down with my back against a rock and waited for the sun to come up. And in time, that's just what it did – slow to spread its colorful palette across the rugged face of the canyon, yet persistent in its daily act of creation. And you know what? No one else came by. I was alone for almost an hour, until a lone jogger briefly passed by.

Hear John's poetry again: *He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to his own and his own people did not accept him.* Et incarnatus est. The Word became flesh and lived among us, and yet the world – we, the people of the world, failed to take notice. How is that possible? Is it because we're so bad, so blind, so sinful? No, that's the easy way out. Knock humans down so that God seems all the higher. The truth is more complex than that. Like campers told the best spot to view the sunrise over the Grand Canyon is a half mile

down the trail, we often choose to stay in our warm sleeping bags. We are reluctant to make our way down rocky trails in pre-dawn darkness. We tell ourselves we need to save our energy for other challenges of the day; and that we don't have time to take in every beautiful melody, every work of art, every dazzling sunrise over the canyon that might come our way. We're only human, for God's sake.

Or rather, we're human, by God's love. Which is precisely why God tabernacles with us, pitching a tent next to us in our various campsites of life: On our front lawns. Next to the office building. Outside the hospital wing. Near the nursing home. Behind the funeral parlor. Wherever we go, especially when we don't get up to see the sunrise. Especially when we don't manage to get it totally right. Especially when those around us get it excruciatingly wrong. *The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory. And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace upon grace.*

Remember what I said at the beginning of this sermon – how melody depends on harmony in order to be truly pleasing. Beautiful things depend on other things to be beautiful. In a powerful, humbling way, God has said that the melody of heaven will not be heard without the accompaniment of human life. The poetry of faith will not be spoken without using the language of earth. We look around and wonder how can that be? In our messy lives and messy relationships, in our coats that need to last another season, our fleshly bodies that often ache and seem far from glorious, living out our days where there's little time for reflecting on either sunrises or sunsets, how can this be? But then we hear the song again, the beautiful melody composed for us, the promise of a presence that is the light of all people. Even for us. Especially for us. Et incarnatus est.

AMEN