

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And 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.

“In This Drama God Will Be Played By a Baby”

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I'm afraid you're not going to understand what I'm trying to say, and it's not my fault. I have done my best. I'm afraid you're just not going to get it. I haven't ever preached to a congregation that was better-looking than this one, although some of the churches I have served were more attentive, or had better cars. I preached in one church that thought they were smarter than this one, First Church in Boulder, but they wouldn't have understood what I'm about to say, either. And it's really not your fault. It's the subject.

Christmas doesn't exactly make sense. Some things don't make sense. For example, why do you see an interstate highway in Hawaii? And why are there flotation devices under airplane seats instead of parachutes? And if nothing ever sticks to Teflon, how do they make the Teflon stick to the pan? And if 7-11 is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, why are there locks?

A few days ago I got a call from someone telling me I'd won big, good news, I had won big gifts, maybe a trip somewhere, maybe a car, perhaps cash. Just a few questions to answer. Am I the man of the house? I said, sometimes. How old are you? I said, depends on the day. They said, "Do you make less than \$15,000 a year?" I said, "You've got to make \$15,000 a year to get this prize?" They said yes. I said, "Let me see if I understand this. You're telling me if I make less than \$15,000 a year, I can't win. In other words, if you don't need it, you can win it. But if you need it, you can't." "Yes."

That's the sort of thing Christmas is. It sound like it should add up, but when you add it up, there's a decimal point in the wrong place. You know, the problem is that Christmas comes wrapped and put in a box, and we've got to unwrap it and take it out of the box.

Christmas is an obscure message, like Jesus is the reason for the season, but what does that mean? Rebecca's going to tell you. It's in a package. You can't see it till you open it, and when you open it, you're not sure what it said, but you can't open it unless you know you need it. The package hides it. We say things about Christmas, things like "Do you know the greatest gift you're going to get at Christmas is the gift from God?" Now, what does that mean? We have to open it.

Let me tell you a story given to me by someone who comes to church here. This story has been playing with my mind all week. The greatest gift of Christmas is the gift from God. What does it mean? A wealthy man, his wife had died, his son, the two of them collected great art. Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, on the walls of the family estate. The son had a business mind. His father was proud of him. The two of them were a team. War came. The son left to serve his country. Then, the telegram saying he was missing in action. Then the word that he had died rushing to help a soldier to get medical help. Christmas came. The pictures on the wall loomed. They haunted, reminder of the loss. Christmas morning, a knock at the door. A soldier in uniform. "I was a friend of your son's. I was the one he rescued. I brought you something. See, I'm an artist. I want you to have this. It's a portrait I painted of your son." It was not great art, but it was the young man's face. It captured his spirit. The painting was put over the fireplace. It gave great satisfaction to the old man, and in the months to come, it was discovered that the young man had saved several other soldiers' lives. The painting captured his spirit. The old man then unfortunately became ill, and he died leaving no heirs. There was an auction. It was an event. Art dealers came from all over the world. The mansion was packed. The auctioneer began, as the will instructed, with the portrait of the son. "Who will bid a hundred dollars?" Silence. "Get on with the good art," they said. "That's just a poor drawing of his son" a voice in the back of the room said. "I bid ten dollars, it's all I have." "Sold!" The gavel fell. The crowd cheered. "Now we can get on with it, the real art," the auctioneer announced that the auction was over. "According to the will of the father, whoever takes the son gets it all."

The greatest gift of Christmas, as we say as Christians, is a gift from God, God's son. Evelyn Underhill wrote, "The primary declaration of Christianity is not "This do," but "This happened."" It's not an imperative, it's a declarative. God so loved the world that God gave us this only son to us. We are gifted with the son, the Christ, who does not judge us but encourages us, who does not tell us what we have to do but gives us the courage to do what we know we must. Who does not point the finger of blame at us, but rather lends the hand for us to forgive. Who does not give us more than we can handle, but who shows us how to handle what we've been given, even if it means we have to carry a cross. Who doesn't load us up with guilt, but who provides us the example of the good that leads the life eternal to the point that death is not the dead-end wall we often think, but a step through the door that we can take absolutely without fear. The greatest gift at Christmas, the gift from God, whoever gets the son, gets it all. And we need it.

Secondly, the meaning of Christmas is wrapped in a box, and things said about it have to be unpacked. We need it, but we need to know it. Secondly, with God all things are possible. Christmas means love came down. Love came to us at Christmas, and we need

to know that. So many words telling us what is not possible. I was once on a committee that was trying to draw up a list of qualifications to determine which of the ministerial students who would be ordained would be successful in the parish. We were trying to draw up a list. I said, "I've been on a committee for eight years and chaired the committee for four years, that we ordained, we decided who to ordain and who not to ordain. I have taught classes to seminary students for ten years. I watch what happens to the candidates that I've interviewed. I watch what happens to the students that I've taught, and I see students, young people, who we think have no chance in the parish take off, really bloom. I'm not sure we can tell. Oh, you might say of somebody, "This person should go far, and the sooner they start, the better." Or you might say, "They have illusions of adequacy." Or you might say, "When they leave they are depriving their home village of its idiot." You might say that. But there's absolutely no way, it is not possible to judge, because the fact is, anything is possible."

I'm reminded of the man who called his doctor to get the results of lab tests, and the doctor said, "I have some bad news and some worse news." "Give me the bad news first." "Well, according to your test results, you're going to die in 24 hours." "What could possibly be worse news than that?" "Well, I have to tell you, I tried to contact you yesterday." In a world of bad news, we need to hear some good news. At a time when we ponder what is only possible, the good news is that all things are possible. Love came down at Christmas.

Her name was Linda Burdish. Her story was featured on the news show 20/20. She was a teacher, an artist, and a poet, 28 years old. Severe headaches. The doctors discovered the problem. It was serious, and she must have surgery, but if she had surgery, the chances of surviving it were not good. The decision was made to wait six months, so she quit teaching school, she pursued her art and her writing. She wrote poems, good poetry, got it published. Painted pictures, portraits exhibited in art galleries, most of it sold. One poem, one piece of poetry, one painting, she kept. At the end of six months, she had the surgery, and the night before the surgery, she wrote a will. She donated all the parts of her body to whomever could use them in the even of her death. The surgery happened. She died. End of the story. Except, it isn't. Never is it the end of the story. Remember, we believe in the God of love, and that all things are possible, and love came down. Her eyes were taken. A young man, age 28, went from darkness to sight because of her, and he was so thankful he wrote a note to the eye bank wanting to thank the relatives of the donor. He was given the names of the Burdish family. He went to see them, was invited to spend the weekend with them. "Could I see her room?" He was taken up to Linda's room. Looking at the books. She had read Plato and Emerson and Emily Dickinson. He looked at the books she had read, he had read in Braille. At breakfast the next day, Linda's mother looked at him and said, "I've seen you some place before, I don't know where." Was it the eyes, Linda's eyes? It could be it was that, she thought. But then she figured it out. She invited him back up to Linda's room and pulled out a picture Linda had painted, the only one that didn't sell. Linda had painted a portrait of her ideal man. Guess what? It was identical to the young man who had received her eyes. Linda's mother then read the last poem she had written the night before her surgery. It read, "Two hearts passing in the night, falling in love, never able to gain each other's sight."

It's this kind of thing that happens. With God, all things are possible. Love came down on Christmas. Fred Craddock said it, he's right, "To Mary, a teenage girl, in a little town in northern Israel, unmarried, she had been promised by her family to a carpenter who lived in Nazareth, by the name of Joseph. They were not married yet, and the messenger said, 'You're going to have a child.' 'But I don't have a husband.' 'You're going to have a child, he will bless the world.' The child, Jesus, grew up in spite of the fact that he was mistreated and abandoned and made fun of and mocked and beaten and executed. Wherever he went, people's hearts are lifted. Wherever he's spoken of, people become kind and generous. People who remember Jesus will repair their neighbor's house or shovel their driveway when it snows, or repair their roof when a tree falls on it. They'll love even their enemies. They'll turn the other cheek if offended. They'll go the second mile. All because a messenger said, 'You're going to have a child, and you name him Jesus.' And Mary said, 'I don't get it.' And the angel said 'Nothing, nothing is impossible with God.'"

We need to hear it, and we will hear it, if we know we need it, and are willing to unpack it. Christmas comes wrapped. Words we need to hear, but we have to unpack. We need to hear love came down at Christmas, with God all things are possible. We need to know the best gift at Christmas is from God who gave a son named Jesus.

And finally, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. God as a child. Incarnation. What does that mean? In the drama, the Christmas drama, the baby is not played by a 60-watt light bulb. The baby is a baby, and the baby for us is God. When I look back at my 42 years of a long and less-than-illustrious time in the church, as a minister, there are moments I know God was not pleased. Like the time I suggested to the trustees of one of the churches I served that they go to a feed lot and use their pickup trucks to get manure and then we could sell it to raise money for the church budget. I don't think that was probably a high point. And then as I've mentioned before, there was the day I read the Scripture and reversed the words, reading of Jesus baptism and suggest that Jesus was baptized by Jordan in the John. That was not a good day.

But frankly, the dumbest thing I've ever done, I think, though you could probably come up with something better, was to try to kill the impulse, in the second church I served, when someone who had absolutely no chance of directing a Christmas pageant, that person's always the one who says, "We must have a children's Christmas pageant, because the children are cute." I was a newly minted, somewhat demented doctoral recipient with stripes on my arm and air in my head, and I cited the scholars I had studied. I had read Bultmann, I had had a year exegeting Greek, another year exegeting Hebrew, and the idea of having adults and children gathered in front of a large 3-tiered cake with one candle in the middle of it singing "Happy Birthday, Jesus" was like for me singing "Amazing Grace" three times in one hour. Or fingernails on a chalkboard. Take your pick. "You know," I said, "there are real questions about whether any of the happened," I said stupidly. "And besides, if we're going to do this, we ought to at least be fair to the Biblical text, because the Magi really didn't visit the Christ child when he was an infant. That was two years later, you know that. And he wasn't born in December, and

there wasn't snow on the ground, and you tell me how one star hangs over a manger where you can see where to go. And you tell me where it says in history books that a census was called for. Herod wasn't even alive when Jesus was born." I thought my case was compelling. But the people bowed their necks and stiffened their spines, the people said, "We will have a Christmas pageant, not because the children are cute but because we've got to save the soul of our pastor, who is spending too much time in books."

Of course they were right, and there was a Christmas pageant, and the baby in the manger, and the word did become flesh. It just does that. Tom Trotter wrote a book, *God With Us*, and he tells us incarnation suggests that the most cosmic event, the coming of God into the world, has taken place in the most simple and natural event imaginable, the birth of a child. And perhaps that's right, the Christmas pageant says it and shows it. The kids are cute, but it's more than that. It's incarnation, it's God in the flesh with us.

Michael Brown is a United Methodist pastor in North Carolina. Shortly after his father, died, and it was sudden, he was in deep grief. He loved his dad, now he was gone. It was Christmas, he was sad. He was in a shopping mall in a food court for lunch alone in his thoughts, heartbroken, head hung low, almost ready to cry, missing his father. Suddenly there was a voice like an angel's voice. Maybe it was an angel's voice. "Hi, my name is Alicia. I'm three years old. What's your name?" And Mike looked down into those big brown eyes, beautiful little girl with her hair braided, smiling up at him, and she walked over and without being asked, she hugged Mike's leg and then extended her arms for Mike to pick her up, as her mom nodded that it was okay. So he picked her up, and three-year-old Alicia softly nestled her head on his shoulder, and he just stood there, hugging her, remembering what it was like to hug his sons that way, remembering his father's strong arms holding him when he was a little boy. He stood there holding Alicia, and her mother said, "I'm sorry, sometimes Alicia is too friendly. Alicia, come on down now. You've got to get down." And Mike looked at Alicia's mom and mouthed the words so Alicia couldn't hear but the mom could hear, "My father died last week. I needed this hug." And so they just stood there and smiled, as a three-year-old daughter surprised a grieving stranger with a hug. Michael would later say, "I believe God was hugging me through Alicia."

It's in James Moore's book *The Rich and the Things That Matter*. Children, the word, made flesh, God with us. One two-and-a-half-year-old was explaining Christmas to his grandmother, about how the wise men brought gold, myrrh and pepperoni, and maybe there was pizza in the back of the inn on Christmas night, but that story, on that level of truth, that word becoming flesh and dwelt among Nana has a whole different flavor because of a two-and-a-half-year-old. Children are cute. The child in the manger gets us out of our books. Children act it out, they make it real. Children bring Christmas down to us so we can grasp it. It's like the two children who were talking about Santa Claus, and one of them said, "I know there's a Santa Claus. You know why I know there's a Santa Claus? Because my parents can't afford all the stuff I get at Christmas. That's why there a Santa Claus." Unto us a child is born. Something comes alive. The word made flesh, it dwells among us, in the child who gives you a hug, or in the clerk who gives you a smile, or the friend who gives you a call, or the loved one who gives you a kind word. Or the

memory of the loved one who gives you a visit. You know, a visit from somewhere. They're telling you to keep up your hope, however down you've gotten to be. Unto us, a child is born. The word becomes flesh. Incarnation. God with us.

The greatest gift we'll get is from God. Love came down at Christmas. The word becomes flesh. Incarnation. Tonight, some of us are going to get on a bus and that bus is going to take us to Greeley, Colorado to see the Griswolds' house. It is all lit up, syncopated with music, the trans-Siberian railroad music, Christmas music, lights coordinated, the house performs. The sight is like something you've never seen before. That's the meaning of Christmas, and we'll see it, we will, but not in the house with the lights and the music where the cars are lined up to see it and hear it. It isn't there, it's a sign on the house next door, and it says, the house beside the house with all the lights and the people coming from miles to see and hear it, the house next door has a sign, and it says it for us, it says, "We tried." That's all we ask. Because the way it comes to us seems bigger than its message. No one entirely gets it. No one ever has. This year, let it be said, we tried. Again.