

Elizabeth Locher  
Preached at Grace Church, Alexandria, Virginia  
Christmas Day, 2013

Isaiah 52:7-10  
Hebrews 1:1-12  
John 1:1-14

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”

These, I think, are some of the most powerful words found in Holy Scripture. Sometimes they really strike me, right in the heart, with the awe-inspiring force of that truth, and what it means that the God and Creator of all the whole Universe took on a human body and was born as a human child.

At this time of year, I, and perhaps all of us, are seeking for that feeling of being struck in the heart. To feel, fresh and new, the wonder and awe of the Incarnation - of the birth of God. Of the astonishing love that led our God and Creator to become one of us - our human brother.

Perhaps we have felt that wonder, or had glimpses of it, in these last several hours as we have begun again to celebrate the birth of God. And now we have come together here, to sing and hear about the miracle once more. To gaze at the crèche, and imagine the miraculous birth in Roman Palestine 2,000 years ago.

And we have come to participate in it, too. To take part in the wonderful time-travel of worship, where we gather together in a sacred space and move into sacred time. We step here into the mystery of the Christian liturgical year, in such a way that we were able to pray in the opening collect today, thanking God that “at this time” He was born of a pure virgin. We gather in faith that we, at this moment, can be connected to that holy moment in Bethlehem.

And that holy time-travel continues, and becomes ever more powerful as we continue through this service today. Soon we will gather at the altar “in remembrance” of Jesus, as he asked us to do. But it will be more than a simple commemoration of times past. Because Jesus has pledged to us that when we gather in His name and “in remembrance” of Him, He will be truly among us, present in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. Come to Earth to be among us once more, as at His Incarnation.

Present also, as the celebrant will say, “In his blessed Passion and precious Death; his mighty Resurrection and glorious Ascension”. All those moments will intersect with this moment in our lives when we go to the altar and have God placed in our hands.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” and He is with us still. The Mystery and Miracle of the Eucharist is that Jesus comes to be present with us here and now, as He was present to His family and His disciples long ago.

And so we are stepping into sacred time and space, in the midst of all the other celebrations and activity of this season. In the midst, too, of many other opportunities to look around for the presence of Christ among us: in those we love, in those who are driving us crazy right now! In moments of peace, and delight, and wonder, and even chaos, at Christmas. This sacred time here may help us to go back out into the world with eyes refreshed and ready to see the presence of God in all parts of our lives.

Between gifts and parties and family and friends we pause here to be reminded and experience again the Gift from God that is at the heart of all our other celebrations. The central wonder and mystery of God’s Incarnation.

The Anglican poet John Betjeman wrote a poem that might help draw us back to this central miracle in the midst of the Christmas season. He called it “Christmas”, and most of the poem concerns the busy activity of Christmas - decorations and gift-giving and gatherings of family and friends. And then, in the final three stanzas which I’d like to share with you, he turns, and asks about that Gift from God that is behind all the other gifts we give, that is the heart of all our celebrations. He writes:

“And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window’s hue,  
A Baby in an ox’s stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,  
No caroling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.”

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And He is among us still.

At the Eucharist, we will find ourselves kneeling at the manger, encountering the Miracle with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and angels.

We will encounter God, receive him in our hands and into our own bodies. And then we will go forth from this place, in the Name of Christ, bearing Christ within us to those whom we live among.

So, how today shall we continue to celebrate the Incarnation? We begin here, worshipping the Child of Bethlehem and experiencing the wonder once more. God made human, to live and die and rise again among us and for us.

And then perhaps, we can continue the celebration by going out into the world bearing Christ. By joining John the Baptist, who “came to bear witness to the light.” By proclaiming with our lives, our joy, and perhaps, even (especially if someone asks us!) with our words, that this Child we celebrate today, this human who poured out all his life as a loving offering to others and then rose victorious from the grave, He is also the God and Creator and Ruler of the universe.

However hard it may be at times, even at this time of year, to remember this Truth, or perceive it in the busyness of our lives, still He is there, He is *here*, among us.

However mundane or unmiraculous our own daily lives might seem, they are holy, because they are touched by God, who came to Earth and lived His own, often mundane, human life as well.

And whatever darkness or powers of hatred, or anger, violence, cruelty, or death we may see in the world around us even now, we are promised that they will not be the victors in the end. God, the God of Love, wins a victory as unexpected as this birth we celebrate today. A victory for love that happens through this birth which we celebrate today.

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and - thanks be to God! - we *have* seen His glory.