

**Hebrews 1:1-4**

**John 1:1-18**

**December 13, 2020**

**Third Sunday of Advent: JOY**

## **A COSMIC CHRISTMAS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On Sunday, December 4, 1977, the Canadian Broadcasting Company premiered a television special called “A Cosmic Christmas.” Here is the plot summary from Wikipedia: “Three aliens from an unknown planet, who bear a strong resemblance to the Biblical [Wise Men] (*sic*) visit Earth to know the true meaning of Christmas. Peter, a young boy, and Lucy, his goose, are the first to encounter them. Unable to find the true meaning of Christmas in town, Peter takes them to his family’s house in the woods. While Peter’s grandmother tells the aliens about her memories of Christmas, Marvin, one of the town’s bullies, steals Lucy. In the chase to rescue Lucy, Marvin falls through the ice in a lake. Peter attempts to rescue him but falls into the lake as well. The townsfolk, who were out searching for the aliens, attempt to save the boys but their human chain is not long enough to reach them. The three aliens, who had sworn not to interfere with events on Earth, decide to help in order to learn the meaning of Christmas. The rescue effort is successful. The townsfolk are quick to condemn Marvin for stealing Lucy, but have a change of heart when they realize that Marvin stole Lucy because he had nothing to eat. Peter offers Marvin and his friends the chance to join them for Christmas dinner and the aliens realize that family and the spirit of forgiveness are the true meaning of Christmas.”<sup>1</sup>

If that story line sounds hard to believe, then what do we do with these opening verses of the gospel of John? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . .” (John 1:1-2, 14a) That’s absurd! But that doesn’t mean it’s not true or trustworthy. I use the word “absurd” in the sense of something that is “beyond the reach of our minds.”

By definition and experience, the divine and the mortal can’t and don’t mix. The definition of “divine” is “of or like God” and the definition of God includes these characteristics: “immortal and having special powers over the lives and affairs of people and the course of nature; the creator and ruler of the universe, regarded as eternal, infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing.” The first definition of the adjective “mortal” is “that must eventually die” and the definition of the noun “mortal” is “a being who must eventually die.”

And yet, John begins his gospel, not with shepherds and wise men and a star in the East and a baby in the manger, but all the way back to “in the beginning.” Actually, John takes us back before the beginning. As someone commented, it’s as if John draws back the curtain and lets us peek at what was happening before the creation of all things. And what we see is the Word. “In the beginning” in Genesis 1, God created by

speaking his Word — “Then God said . . . and there was.” God’s Word is alive. God’s Word is powerful. God’s Word is life-giving. And God’s Word became flesh and lived among us. (John 1:14) Eugene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*, says, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

That’s Christmas! That’s what we call the incarnation. On a cold night last week, Nancy and I enjoyed warm bowls of chili **con carne**, chili **with meat**. From behind the curtain of creation, the Word came down and put on meat and bones and lived among us. How else can we think about this fundamental paradox, divine and mortal in one person, on our behalf? We might say God has some “skin in the game,” a phrase that’s usually used in financial circles. It means to incur risk by being involved in achieving a goal. The skin is the symbol of the person involved. The game is a metaphor for the actions involved. God incurred risk, put some “skin in the game,” by sending the Word to become flesh and live among us. A couple of chapters later, John puts it this way: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Was there risk involved for God? Of course there was, as John tells us, “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.” (John 1:10-11)

But some did receive the Word. We might say they accepted the greatest Christmas gift ever and, according to John, “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.” (John 1:12-13) So, the incarnation — the “putting on flesh” — of the Word in Jesus of Nazareth makes a difference for each and every one of us who is flesh, who is mortal, who must eventually die.

In his book, *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner writes, “The Word became flesh. Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed. Incarnation. It is not tame. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable darkness riven with unbearable light. Agonized laboring led to it, vast upheavals of intergalactic space, time split apart, a wrenching and tearing of the very sinews of reality itself. You can only cover your eyes and shudder before it, before this: ‘God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God . . . who for us and for our salvation,’ as the Nicene Creed puts it, ‘came down from heaven.’ The incarnation is a kind of vast joke whereby the Creator of the ends of the earth comes among us in diapers . . . Until we too have taken the idea of the God-man seriously enough to be scandalized by it, we have not taken it as seriously as it demands to be taken.”<sup>2</sup>

Over the past nine months, we have all come to understand how important and necessary our personal relationships are for a full life, as we have been separated and quarantined and isolated. As the creation story teaches us, we are social creatures, made to be in fellowship with one another. So, as hard as it is to wrap our minds around the idea of “the Word became flesh,” we welcome the good news of the incarnation at Christmas and, way down deep in our souls, we just know that’s the way God had to make himself known to us in all of God’s glory, grace, and truth.

In 1930, playwright Marc Connelly won the Pulitzer Prize for his play *Green Pastures*, which was made into a movie in 1936 with an all-black cast. The play and movie tell Bible stories from the perspective of different biblical characters and from the black experience. In one scene, the Lord looks down from heaven and frets about what to do with the sinful situation of the world. The angel Gabriel sees God is upset and asks, “Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?” The Lord replies, “No, no, don’t touch the trumpet, not yet.” As God continues to stew about what to do with the earthly situation, Gabriel again asks him what he plans to do. Perhaps God should send someone down to Earth to take care of things. Gabriel says, “How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?” God continues to look down on Earth and says, I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!”<sup>3</sup>

As mysterious as these opening words of John’s gospel are, as cosmic in scope as the Word and creation are, as much as the good news of God becoming human, the Word becoming flesh is, the message is rooted in the very stuff of our lives — God became one of us; God moved into our neighborhood; God has shared in our humanity so that we might share in God’s divinity. That’s Christmas! That’s incarnation!

Several years ago, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin wrote a short article for *The Washington Post* called “A rabbi’s Christmas sermon: May God become incarnate in you.” The beginning and ending of his article are worth hearing:

He begins, “My fantasy of the season: It’s the afternoon before Christmas Eve. A clergy colleague from the neighboring church calls in a panic. He’s stuck in an airport and won’t be able to make it back to town in time for the service. ‘You have to fill in for me,’ he pleads. Gulp. ‘Sure,’ I say, eager to help out a colleague in distress. ‘But what do I say?’ With that, my colleague’s cell phone runs out of juice, and I’m on my own. Here goes.

“Let’s cut to the chase. This season is not about reindeer, gifts, trees, wreaths, ‘Jingle Bells’ or Santa Claus. No — this season is about the Incarnation. Christmas claims that God took the human form of a Jewish child, born to refugee parents in a manger in Bethlehem. Because of this child, God is no longer aloof from the world. In the words of the Christian novelist Frederick Buechner: ‘If you do not hear in the message of Christmas something that must strike some as blasphemy and others as sheer fantasy, the chances are you have not heard the message for what it is.’ Emmanuel: ‘God is with us.’”

The rabbi ends with these words, “As for me, I have my own Christmas minhag (custom). Right before December 25, I call my cherished Christian colleagues. This is what I say: “This year, may God truly become incarnate for you and those you love.”<sup>4</sup>

Amen and amen!

***Let us pray: O God, you spoke your Word and revealed your good news in Jesus, the Christ. Fill all creation with that Word again, so that by proclaiming your joyful promises to all nations and singing of your glorious***

***hope to all peoples, we may become one living body, your incarnate presence on the earth. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“A Cosmic Christmas,” at [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org).

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Lane Butts, “A Permanent Glimpse of God,” January 4, 2009 at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

<sup>4</sup>Jeffrey Salkin, “A rabbi’s Christmas sermon: May God become incarnate in you,” December 23, 2014, at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).