

GOD CON CARNE

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.

Chili enthusiasts and purists are as deeply divided about their signature dish as North Carolinians are divided between red sauce and vinegar sauce BBQ. Some chili cooks say there is no place for beans in chili. If it has beans, it's not chili. Other chili cooks add plenty of beans, especially if they're trying to feed a big group of people, say for the Super Bowl.

Here's a chili recipe you can try some time:

The ingredients are: dried beef, suet, dried chili peppers and salt.

Pound the ingredients together, form into bricks, and leave to dry.

When you're ready to cook your chili, put a brick in a pot of boiling water.

This recipe was used by settlers on the American frontier. They could prepare the chili blocks ahead of time, and boil up a pot of chili on the trail. You could still find "brick chili" on store shelves in small towns and rural areas in the American Southwest well into the 20th century.

Unless they're making a vegetarian chili, most chili cooks will list "carne" or "meat" as the #1 ingredient — stew meat, beef chuck, ground beef. The Texas Beef Council claims that the "real deal, old school Texas style chili con carne" has absolutely no beans and no tomatoes, just beef/carne and chiles, and lots of them.

In the spirit of chili con carne and its Southwest and Mexican roots, I could have called this sermon "Dios Con Carne." Instead, you got a halfway translation — "God Con Carne." The sermon title was inspired by John 1:14, which says, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." John's gospel is often considered the most "spiritual" of the four gospels and, in many ways, it is, with John's elaborate use of symbolism. But John's spirituality is grounded right from the get-go in the "earthly" affirmation that "the Word became flesh."

The word for "flesh" — *sarx* — can certainly mean this skin and meat we all wear on our bones. *Sarx* also means our human nature, our being human. To say "the Word became flesh and lived among us" means more than that Jesus sort of looked like us while he was here on earth. John 1:14 expresses one of the greatest paradoxes and greatest hopes of our Christian faith: God came down, God became flesh, God became one of us in Jesus of Nazareth.

You may have already noticed that our final hymn today is a Christmas carol, #31, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." In her Sunday morning devotion on last weekend's retreat, Obbie Clemmons had us sing "Joy to the World!" Obbie said, "I think we ought

to sing Christmas carols all year long!” Obbie has a point. Why restrict these great songs to two, three, or four weeks out of the year?

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” tells the story of John 1, especially in the second verse:

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased in flesh with us to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”*

There is another, lesser known Christmas carol that also talks about the “Incarnate Deity.” In 1885, Christina Rossetti wrote a Christmas poem called “Love Came Down at Christmas.” The words have been set to several different tunes. While the carol is not on the traditional song list at Christmas, the words are a good summary of what John tells us in these opening words of his gospel:

*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.*

*Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?*

*Love shall be our token,
Love shall be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.*

What difference does it make that “Love Came Down at Christmas”? What difference does it make that God was “pleased in flesh with us to dwell”? What difference does it make that “the Word became flesh and lived among us”?

Bono is the lead singer for the Irish rock band, U2. Many people may have heard of Bono because of his humanitarian work, but they may not realize he has a deep Christian faith. In a 2005 interview, Bono was asked about Jesus being the Son of God.

The interviewer said, “Christ has his rank among the world’s great thinkers. But Son of God, isn’t that far-fetched?”

Bono gave a very interesting answer to the interviewer:

“No, it's not farfetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off that hook. Christ says: *No. I'm not saying I'm a teacher, don't call me teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I'm saying: "I'm the Messiah." I'm saying: "I am God incarnate."* And people say: *No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet, we can take. You're a bit eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don't mention the "M" word! Because, you know, we're gonna have to crucify you.* And he goes: *No, no. I know you're expecting me to come back with an army, and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah.* At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says: *Oh, my God, he's gonna keep saying this.*”¹

How did Bono come to that conclusion about Jesus? Here’s a different kind of Christmas story. Bono returned to Dublin after a long tour in Japan. He attended a Christmas Eve worship service, where he sat behind a column which kept him from seeing much of anything. Although he was tired from the long tour, he read the gospel lesson for the evening, from John 1. He was overcome by the truth of the gospel message about “God con carne.” Here’s what he says:

“The idea that God, if there is a force of Love and Logic in the universe, that it would seek to explain itself is amazing enough. That it would seek to explain itself by becoming a child born in poverty . . . and straw, a child, I just thought, ‘Wow!’ Just the poetry . . . Unknowable love, unknowable power describes itself as the most vulnerable . . . I saw the genius of picking a particular point in time and deciding to turn on this . . . Love needs to find a form, intimacy needs to be whispered . . . Love has to become an action or something concrete. It would *have* to happen. There *must* be an incarnation. Love must be made flesh.”

Our morning epistle lesson is another version of John 1, “God Con Carne,” “God-in-the-flesh.” With the words of an ancient Christian hymn, the apostle Paul tells us that Christ Jesus was in the form of God, was equal to God — or, as John 1 puts it, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Paul goes on to tell us that Christ Jesus gave all of that up — his privileges, his honor, his glory, his position — to become one of us. He didn’t quit being God, but he used all of his privileges and powers and glory and righteousness and faith to serve and save us rather than himself. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

What does Jesus’ obedience to the point of death — even death on a cross — have to do with you and me? 1 John 2:5-6 says, “By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as he walked.” *The Message* transla-

tion puts it this way, “Anyone who claims to be intimate with God ought to live the same kind of life Jesus lived.”

If Love came down at Christmas . . .

If Love walked in our midst in Jesus of Nazareth . . .

If Love endured the cross of Calvary so we might be free from sin and live for God

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Then “God Con Carne” means everything for your life and mine. The second-century A.D. church father and theologian, Irenaeus, said, “God has become what we are so that we might become what God is.” How do we love a philosophical principle? How do we love an abstract idea of a Higher Power? How do we know we are loved by God? Again, 1 John tells us, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him . . . he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:9-10)

Today we gather around the baptismal font and celebrate the sacrament of baptism with John-Ward and his family. Just imagine — at one point in history, the Son of God himself was also a four month-old little boy, in his mother and father’s arms, dependent on them for everything. That little baby boy was “God in the flesh.” That little baby boy grew up and gave up his life for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine. That little baby boy emptied himself, humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death. That little baby boy’s life and death make this little baby boy’s — John-Ward — new life possible. God-in-the-flesh, Love come down at Christmas makes our new life in Christ possible.

We heard the water splash into the baptismal bowl this morning, as I said the words, “Hear the **sound** of the good news! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.” John-Ward felt the warm water when I put it on his head. This water, these actions, tell us about God’s love in a very real way.

Someone has said that “Sacraments are the things, the stuff, the concrete objects that God uses to come to us. We have a God with bread on. We have a God with wine on. We have a God with water on.” We could add to that list, “We have a God with meat and skin on.” Jesus Christ — God-with-us, the Word made flesh, is how God came to us. As John reminds us, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (John 1:18)

Later in John’s gospel, Jesus talks with his disciples about his looming death. Naturally the disciples are upset that Jesus is going away. But Jesus tells them they will continue doing his work here on earth, even after he has gone. “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12)

Think about what that means for your life and mine and for this church. It’s no coincidence the church is called “the body of Christ.” As Jesus’ disciples and followers, we are called in our baptisms to “put flesh on” what we believe,

to “live as Jesus lived,” to put love “into action, in something concrete.” We are called to incarnate God’s love.

Five hundred years ago, Teresa of Avila wrote a devotion called “Christ Has No Body.” Perhaps you’re familiar with it:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

“Pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.”

God-with-us!

God Con Carne!

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Incarnate God, you loved humanity enough to take on a human body. We are now your body on earth. Show us how to live as your body in our own lives and in the ways we treat others. Amen.

NOTES

¹Bono: *In Conversation with Michka Assaya*, 2006, p. 139.