

WHEN THE WORD BECOMES FLESH

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Reading: John 1: 1-4, 14 (NRSV)

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 were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and glory.

This being Christmas Sunday, I invite you to consider this reading of John. You noticed, without doubt, that it is not your usual Christmas narrative. It is not a story of angels, shepherds, or wise men. John's gospel is often called the "spiritual gospel" because so much of what he writes is esoteric or theological.

The Christian tradition celebrates the birth of Jesus, referred to by some writers of the synoptic gospels as Emmanuel, the Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Son of God, and the Christ. St. John begins his gospel with a bolder claim. He writes that in the beginning – the beginning when star dust and gas exploded across the void – in the beginning when suns, moons, and planets were set on their cosmic journey – in the beginning when the waters of chaos were separated from the land of the living – in the

beginning before there was history and time – there was the Word. John, of course, used the Greek work, *logos*. But the idea of the Word of God is much older than John, and older than the Greek philosopher, Philo, who also used the term.

Some people use the term “Word of God” to refer to the Bible. Others think that “Word” must be a theological argument or universal truth. And yet others think that the “Word” is a philosophical or rational process. I would like to take us back to the Hebrew word, *dabhar*. *Dabhar* means two things at the same time. Or you might say it is one coin with two sides. On one side of the coin *dabhar* means word, reason, or divine reason. On the other side of the coin *dabhar* means action or deed. For example, in the first creation story of the book of Genesis we are told that God spoke and there was light, planets, animals, plants, fish, and human beings. There was an idea of creation and all her creatures. There was some power of reason that was both imaginative and cognitive that conceived of life. Those ideas were spoken and life emerged. Action was taken through the expression of words and life was created. There is also something a little sneaky about *dabhar*. It means also to “come from behind.” It suggests that you might not have been expecting it. It caught you unaware. It was not exactly what you had planned for.

If you stop to think about it, this is really not as unbelievable as you might think. Think of all the things that happen in our lives by the power of simple words like “I love you,” or “I want a divorce.”

How does anything in life get created without a process of thought and action? A toaster might be a good idea but it is not a toaster until someone makes one, following the plans of the inventor. You might have love fantasies for another person but unless you speak to that person or invite them to dinner you are not going to have any chance of a relationship. You might think it is a good idea that everybody should drive in one direction on the same side of the road. But there will continue to be accidents and fatalities until that idea is made into a law that is taught to student drivers and enforced by the police.

The Hebrew word, *dabhar*, suggests the same unity of word and deed, reason and creativity. Likewise, the Greek *logos* is the commingling of revelation and manifestation. Paul Tillich declared it to be the tension between the absolutely concrete and the absolutely universal. In the Christian tradition all of the ideas about God are manifest in the person of Jesus. The values and ideation of God are revealed in the flesh, teachings, and life of Jesus. To that extent, Christians believe that Jesus was God and the Jesus was the Word. John declares that this is the *logos* that was present

at the genesis of life. Jesus of Nazareth becomes the cosmic Christ whose beginning and ending range outside the limits of history.

Let us honor the possibility that Jesus, indeed, revealed an understanding of God or God's love that was truly unique to the religions of the world. I do not mean this in an elitist sense. I am not proposing that through Jesus Christians have a connection to God that is exclusive of others. Even the most devout Christian cannot make such a claim because not one of us can experience another person's relationship with the sacred. We can know our relationship with one another. We can know our own relationship with the Spirit of Life. We cannot know and therefore cannot evaluate or judge another's relationship with God.

Having said that let us consider what the sacred revelation was in the man Jesus. What were the universal values that were expressed in the historical Jesus? One sermon cannot cover them all, but I will lift up one that I think is essential. I believe that this theme is meant to be expressed and experienced in concrete human communities. It is not meant to be a platitude or pious ideas or the kind of political pulp for the religiously challenged.

I believe that Jesus was an advocate and agent for the kingdom of God. I think of the realm of God as that time and place in human

relationships where people are in right relationship with one another. That is to say, their relationships are characterized by justice and compassion. This has been the intent of God since the beginning of life. Scripture, ritual, priest or clergy, theology or dogma do not define the kingdom of God. The essence of the kingdom is the undifferentiated and unfettered love and trust between the people who dwell there. Because love is the foundation on which these relationships are based gender, gender orientation, social status, ability, color or ethnicity are immaterial. They are only important to the extent that they are barriers to relationships and become the measures of the kingdom's viability.

Jesus constantly referred to the kingdom through his use of parables. The major characters of the parables were and are the despised and rejected figures in our communities. They typically are the “monkey wrench” or the “fly in the ointment” that disturbs our sense of neat and tidy communities of faith. In Jesus' day they were the Samaritans, unscrupulous landlords, tax collectors, stinky shepherds, and frightened women who were fearful of losing one coin and the hope of a dowry. And it was bad enough that he used these players in his stories, but he actually surrounded himself with the same cast of characters, including the timid, the traitors, and the doubters.

The realm of God, according to Jesus, is most likely to be found in the people you think are most unworthy to represent it and in the circumstances you would least expect to find it. He said that the kingdom was to be found in mold, unclean women, and fields of weeds. You get a sense that the kingdom will sneak up behind you and slither in the back door, much like the Hebrew word *dabhar*.

All of this was held up against the Roman Empire where there was certainly an efficient government, transportation, commerce, and a merciless military establishment. But the empire was carried on the backs of the impoverished and disenfranchised that exploited their labor and their land. Jesus set the kingdom community over and against such occupation forces. It sheltered the broken and marginalized against the powers of a global economy and a military complex capable of preemptive unilateral violence.

The kingdom of God was in the mind of Jesus. The universal principles he advocated, taught, and sought to create cost him his life. He would not have been so dangerous to the government if he were a mere idealist who told stories to children in the public library. But he gave a vision of justice communities that would not bend its knee to Caesar. Despite his crucifixion, his vision would undermine the power of Rome. He meant to make concrete God's realm of love and justice. And to play on

Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," it was one little Word that fell the Roman Empire.

I do not know of another religious figure who had such a vision for humankind save the Mahatma Gandhi. And I suspect that this vision of Jesus is what the Mahatma most admired about him.

I hope that you see in this Word not a metaphysical system but a radically inclusive community. I hope you see the vision of a community where there is a place for every person at the table; a place that stands against the stormy blast of economic and military oppression; a community that values the hearts and minds of people, regardless of their station in life.

Is there not some Word, some *logos*, or some *dabhar* that can bring hope to the world? Is there not some vision of peace or ideal of justice that will generate an authentic world order? Is there not one idea of a compassionate community that human beings will build with and for one another?

Most preachers this morning will assert that "the Word became flesh" in Jesus Christ at Christmastime. I believe that Jesus did not call on the world to affirm his deity. I believe that he would want the Word to become flesh among us. He did not call his disciples to be spectators or docents in

the museum of faith. His call is clearly one of vision and action, compassion and community.

We are called to be the Word that frames a habitat for humanity. It is not enough to hold workshops on poverty. It is not enough to preach peace and go home to Sunday dinner. The world will only have a viable future when human beings pour the foundation, throw up the frame, and tile the roof. The ideal of the village must have walls and wells and ovens and food to go in them. Her people must be able to lay down their heads at night to sleep, undisturbed by the nightmares of rape and murder and slavery.

The Word becomes flesh when Amish farmers attend the funeral of their daughters' murderer and raise funds for his family. The Word becomes flesh when Unitarian Universalists, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews build houses for the poor. The Word becomes flesh when we extend an hour to someone who is afraid, lonely, or dying. The Word becomes flesh when we take tea with an elder who will tell us the same story he has told a million times. The Word becomes flesh when we walk across some artificial barrier and say to some social pariah, "Can I take you to lunch?" The Word becomes flesh every day and every time we extend compassion to another human being.

St. Teresa of Avila declared:

Christ has
No body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours;
No feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes
Through which is to look out
Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet
With which he is to go about
Doing good;
Yours are the hands
With which he is to bless now.

The challenge for me at Christmastide is whether my flesh will become the Word. Like St. Nicholas of Myra, will my bishop's cloak give warmth to children? Will my saint sack be laden with wheat for the hungry? Like St. Brigid of Ireland, will my apron pockets be filled with bread and cheese for the poor? Like the laughing Buddha, Ho Tai, will the folds of my robe hold candy for the young ones and coins for the old ones?

Christmas Sunday is no longer an option for children's stories. It cannot be a narrative we explain away. I pray it is not just a romp through nostalgia. St. John invites us to the maturity of faith and asks us what is born in our souls this day?

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