

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:1-18; Also Psalm 33:6-9; Hebrews 1:1-4

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Have you finished reading all your Christmas cards yet? I am still working on ours. One of the most common Christmas greetings is our text for this morning: the Word became flesh. You often see these four words on a card featuring a picturesque stable with clean straw, happy animals, loving parents, a bright star overhead, and a cuddly baby in a manger. Even if it is not a Precious Moments card, the picture is always charming. As you plow through your Christmas cards – in the midst of family visits, parties with friends, and exchanging presents – it is easy to miss the impact of this message. If we pause for a moment and think about this phrase, “the Word became flesh,” most of us would agree that it refers to the miracle of God becoming man. And this is the central mystery of Christmas – that God should become man. Even for those whose knowledge of God and man is shallow, it is evident that there is something wonderful, something amazing that God should become man. As we ponder this fact, questions come to mind. *How* did God become man? *Why* did God become man? What difference did this make for the world?

I do not plan to answer those particular questions this morning. It is not because I do not know the answers, although a case might be made for this – nor because they are unimportant, for they are – but because these issues are not the focus of our text. Notice that this scripture does *not* say, “God became man.” It says, “the Word became flesh.” The Holy Spirit speaking through the Apostle John deliberately chose to use these curious words because He wanted to communicate something unique and wonderful about what God did that first Christmas. This morning we will ponder each of these words on our way to a deeper understanding of God’s blessing at Christmas.

The Word

We first encounter the word “Word” at the very beginning of John’s gospel. John opens his gospel with a creation account. But instead of presenting God as the creator, he introduces “the Word” as the one who made all things. Right away we are confronted with the trinitarian nature of God. The Word *is* God, and He is also *with* God. This is very confusing. How can someone *be* God, and also be *with* God? Are we talking about one being or two? The church puzzled over this problem (it might be more accurate to say fought over it) for several centuries. In the end we concluded that God is both three and one. We say God is one being who exists in three persons. But why call this other person “the Word”? By the time we get to verse 17 we can see John has been talking about Jesus all along. Why didn’t he simply name Jesus right in verse one?

The Greek word translated “Word” here is *λογος*. Much ink has been spilt over this word and its significance. In Greek literature it takes on the meaning of reason or logic, and it is in fact the origin of the English word “logic.” In some Greek philosophies *logos* was the original organizing principle of the universe, and some people have seen an attempt by John to present Jesus in a way that would be appealing to such Greeks. But John was a Jew, not a Greek, and his works breathe the spirit of the Old Testament more than of Plato. The simple, basic meaning of this word is “communication.” There is a different Greek word, which refers to a combination of letters. *ῥῆμα*, is the Greek word which indicates such words as cow, man, love, and hit. John Calvin preferred to translate *logos* as “speech”, but the best translation seems to be “communication.” This is clumsier than “word”, and since “word” has such a long, familiar history in English Bibles, I think it will always be used to translate *logos*.

Now to return to John’s gospel, we can read, “In the beginning was the communication, and the communication was with God, and the communication was God.” By speaking this way, John confronts us with the vital truth that God is a speaking God. Communication is inherent in God’s nature. Specifically,

verbal communication is inherent to God. In the beginning God spoke. Speaking is so vital to God's nature, He can even be called "The Speaking," for He is the origin of all communication. Before time God spoke to Himself – the Father, the Son, and the Spirit communicating with each other. As He created the earth, God did so by speaking. Listen to psalm 33:4-9.

For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.
By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

God also governs the world by His word. Let us turn to psalm 147:15-19.

He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?
He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.
He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules to Israel.

You see here that the snow, frost, and ice come when God speaks, and melt when God tells them to melt. God rules the world by speaking – both the natural world and the universe of men. In the book of Daniel God ruled the Babylonian Empire by speaking to King Nebuchadnezzar through His prophet Daniel. From Adam to the end of time, God speaks to man. Speaking is so central to God's nature, that He refuses to reveal Himself in pictures. God cannot be represented in pictures, and any attempt to do so is a terrible insult to God. That is why the second commandment is a prohibition against worshiping God with carved images. This is why God is so hostile against idolatry. Using pictures or statues to represent God, even the true God, is a gross misrepresentation of His essential character.

Finally at the climax of history, when God revealed Himself in fullest measure, He did so by speaking. Certainly the life of Jesus is necessary for our salvation, but when the writer of Hebrews begins to explain the significance of Jesus' ministry, he tells us that Jesus spoke. God has always spoken to man. Previously God spoke through His prophets, and this was wonderful. But even more wonderful is the present reality, that God speaks through His Son. The gospels record the words Jesus spoke while here on earth, and the epistles are the word of Jesus coming through His apostles. But what is even more amazing than the fact that Jesus spoke to us, is that He is the original divine speech come in the flesh.

The Flesh

Jesus was a real man. He was not a ghost, or a spirit who appeared as a man. He had a real physical body, like us. But John did not say the Word became a body. He used the word flesh. This word has a very rich and complex use in the New Testament, but its essential significance is a reminder that mankind is made from dust and is inseparably part of creation. Man is not divine, and never will be. But he is more than dust. Man also has a spirit. Spirit and dust are inextricably intertwined in man. He is a spirit-dust creation. So when the Word came to earth to save man, He had to come as dust. The Word became flesh.

Have you ever lived in a barn? Perhaps that sounds like an adventure to you children. The warm golden straw looks inviting, and you could bury into the straw as you tell camping stories before falling asleep. I spent a week sleeping in the straw. It was not in a barn. It was the animal tent at the county fair. I was showing a heifer that I had raised, and it was necessary to keep her clean and ready for the show day. Every day I fed and washed her, and whenever she relieved herself, I was on hand to remove the manure promptly. It *was* an adventure. But you would not want to live in a barn forever. Life as a cow is pretty miserable compared to living in a house. Except for that one week at the fair, our cows lived together in our barn where each one fought for her share of food and they slept in their manure. A barn is cold in winter, hot in summer, and filthy all year.

Can you imagine what it was like for God to take human form? God is so much higher than man, it was extremely degrading to take on flesh. Comparing God's taking on flesh to me living with the cows is terribly inadequate. It is more like living as a worm or a maggot. Have you seen maggots? They are the larvae of flies. They live in manure, or rotting flesh. Can you imagine crawling around in rotten flesh, surviving by eating the stuff? Isn't it horribly disgusting? That is a rough idea of how far God lowered Himself when He took on human flesh. Now flesh is not inherently bad. God made us flesh, and that makes flesh good. Just like maggots. They also were created by God, and are good. But no matter how good human flesh is, we are created beings. Even in all his original splendor, Adam was still far removed from the glory of God. It was an act of supreme humility for the Creator to become part of the creation.

What moved God to take on human flesh? It was His love for man. God's love is so great – greater than we can comprehend. Would you become a maggot, live as a maggot, and die a maggot's death to save maggots? No, and I would not either. The thought is too revolting. I do not love maggots, and frankly would not be disappointed if I never saw another one. But God loves His poor creatures. God loves us so much that He did lower Himself to our level. As Paul said in Philippians, Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) Flesh is the substance of creation. The eternal, uncreated God became part of creation so that He might save His sinful creatures.

The Word Becoming Flesh

So far we have been saying that God took on human flesh. Our text says, “The Word became flesh.” It does not say “Flesh became the Word.” Man did not become God. God became man. This is important for several reasons. First, the initiative for our salvation lay with God. Man did not act to save Himself. Man did not conceive the idea of joining God to flesh. The idea was God's, and God is the one who acted to save mankind. Second, God did not elevate a man to divine status. Flesh did not become God. God lowered Himself to human status. God became man. But God did not become any less God in doing so. The Word was God and remains God forever – without any loss of His divine nature. The divine nature of the Word never changed. What changed was adding a human nature to the Word. At a certain time in history the divine Word took human nature to Himself. Before that, the Word was God. Now the Word is God *and* man. Human nature has been added to the divine nature without changing the divine nature at all. Jesus is not half

God and half man. He is fully God, just as He always was. But now He is also fully man. Jesus is simultaneously 100% God and 100% man. This is what the scripture means when it says, “The Word became flesh.”

By taking flesh God accomplished something that was part of His original plan. From the beginning God planned to live among mankind. Adam’s rebellion severed fellowship between God and man. For thousands of years God kept His distance. Those men and women who worshiped God did so at a distance. God was hidden in wind and fire, clouds and darkness. Even in the best of times, when God lived with His people in Jerusalem, He stayed in behind the thick curtain that separated the holiest place from the rest of the temple. When God sent Moses to deliver His people from Egypt, He said, “I am the LORD...I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.” (Exodus 6:6-7) Many years later, after Israel had sinned grievously and God had sent her into exile, God did not abandon His people or forget His promises. He spoke through Ezekiel.

“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:24-28)

The last word God sent before Christ came was the prophecy to Malachi. God reaffirmed that He would come to His people.

“Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” (Malachi 3:1)

Four hundred years later a messenger announced the arrival of God and then Jesus came preaching the gospel. Jesus came as a man – in human flesh. He was born of a woman, He grew into a man, He learned to walk and speak. He learned a trade. When He entered His ministry, He lived among the fishermen, farmers, and merchants of Galilee. God promised that He would live among His people, but who imagined that He would actually become a man and live among them as man? Later John heard God declare that the covenant promise was fulfilled. At the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21 we read, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Revelation 21:3) By coming in the flesh, God lives with man as intimately as possible.

But remember, the emphasis here is on God as a speaking God. The *Word* became flesh. Jesus is the communication of God. Part of the meaning here is that the words of Jesus are the words of God. Jesus came speaking with divine authority. He did not say, “Thus says the Lord,” like all the other speakers of God’s message. Jesus came saying, “I say to you.” Jesus is the Word, and all He says is divine speech. Whenever Jesus, the man of flesh, speaks, God speaks. But Jesus is also the communication of God just by becoming flesh. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” (Hebrews 1:3) Before Jesus came, God kept telling us through the prophets how to live as godly people. Now God tells us how to please Him by sending His Son as a man. The life of Jesus is the supreme communication of God’s nature and His will for our lives.

Word and Flesh Today

Now if you are thinking that this is all a bunch of theology that has little to do with your life, you would be badly mistaken. First, this scripture reminds us that God reveals Himself in words, not through images. This is not a condemnation of art, and it certainly does not mean that Christians may not engage in painting, sculpture, or film making. It does mean that we may not worship God with images. So we conclude that the use of icons by the Orthodox churches is dreadfully wrong, and we are warned against any use of pictures or statues in worshipping God.

Second, and more profoundly, we learn that God works through speaking. This can be a hard lesson to learn. American culture has always been action-oriented. Our heroes have been the strong, silent types. We tend to be suspicious of orators, and prefer people who speak plainly. One reason George Bush defeated John Kerry in the presidential election is that Bush sounded more down-to-earth and Kerry sounded more polished. Teddy Roosevelt, who was hardly a quiet man, said, “Speak softly and carry a big stick” – emphasis on the stick. So the idea of creating a universe by speaking seems hard to swallow, and sending the Speech to save mankind seems ridiculous. Likewise, Americans tend to give more credit to a minister who *does* something – like feed the poor or help AIDS patients – than one who merely preaches well. We need to fundamentally change our view of how the universe works. God works through speaking, and His images also work through speaking. This means that you should be very aware of what you say. Your words can create and destroy. By your speech you can lift someone’s spirits, or cast him into despair. You can give hope to a struggling child or make your co-workers miserable. God sent the Word to save us. So you should send out your words to help others.

Our third application is that when God came to save us, He shared our nature and lived among us. Now we are the body of Christ on earth. If God is to save people, it will be because His people share the lives of others and live among the lost. There is a balance here between a life of fellowship and a life of mission. Someone who lives among the lost apart from fellowship with believers will fall away or burn out. But when the church uses fellowship as an excuse for shunning the lost, she declares that God hates those who do not believe. You are not called to lower yourself to an inferior mode of life, as Jesus did. You are called simply to live in the flesh with other men and women who do not know God. Read the gospels. Jesus ate and drank with the poor and rich, the prostitutes and hypocrites. Evangelism for Jesus was not a weekly activity. It was His life.

Dozens, maybe hundreds of people at Lehigh University are hearing the gospel through the ministry of RUF. We do not do many so-called evangelistic activities, although I have no objection to those. The gospel is going out through the daily activities of Christian students who study and eat and play with their classmates and neighbors. And we pray. We pray every day at noon, and several times a week we pray for unbelievers. Now and then I hear of people who are hearing the gospel, and then I realize it is just the tip of the iceberg. Take Dan, for instance. He came to a Bible study his freshman year. He was raised Catholic, but no longer believes in God. I did not see him for the next two years. This fall our paths have crossed several times. It turns out RUF students have been witnessing to him all along. We pray for God to give Dan the grace to believe in Jesus, and we keep sharing Jesus with him.

You are much busier than the students at Lehigh, but there are unbelievers in your life. Use words with them. Tell them about Jesus. It does not matter too much what you say. Tell them you are so glad that Jesus came to save you from your sin. Tell them that Jesus clears your guilt and breaks the power of sin. Tell them how awesome it is that the infinite God loves mankind so much He confined Himself to a human form. Pray for them.

Perhaps the most vivid example of the Word made flesh among people is the man or woman who learns the language and culture of a foreign people, and lives among them preaching the gospel. You already support several foreign missionaries, but is that the limit of your concern? Are you hoping and praying that God will call some of your own children and send them out to spend their lives bringing salvation to cultures lost in darkness? I hope so. By sending His Word to us God unleashed the power to save all men. Let us believe this gospel, and pray and plan for the conversion of those remaining cultures where Jesus is hardly known.

The final application of today's scripture is the most important and the most obvious. We should worship God for His enormous love toward us. The true God who deserves our worship is the triune God – a loving fellowship of three divine persons in one being – the God who came to earth and lowered Himself to take on human flesh to save man. We cannot really understand this, nor can we much appreciate the mystery of it all. But to the extent we catch a glimpse of the wonder of God's incarnation for us, let us join in joyful praises of Him who loved us beyond all knowing.

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