



# Second Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2021

Prelude: "O Come Let Us Adore Him"

## Gathering

Liturgist: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

**All:** **Through the Word all things were made; without the Word nothing was made.**

Liturgist: In the Word was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

**All:** **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**  
*John 1: 1-5, 14 adapted*

**All Singing:** **81 "Angels, from the Realms of Glory"**  
*Singing verses 1-3 and 5*

God's Greeting  
Passing the Peace

## Reconciliation

Liturgist: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

**All:** **For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.**

Liturgist: In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, in accordance with pleasure and will –

**All: to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has given us in the One he loves.**  
*Ephesians 1: 3-6 adapted*

Liturgist: Even as your children we run away from you; even as those chosen to be holy and blameless, we are profane and guilty. Hear us, O Father, as we name the truth about ourselves before you:

*Silent Confession and Reflection*

**All Singing: 775 “Across the Lands”**

Liturgist: In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.

**All: With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will – that which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment.**

Liturgist: And the will of God is this: to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

**All: In him we also were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.**

Liturgist: And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. You were marked with a seal, the promise of the Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.  
*Ephesians 1: 7-14 adapted*

**All: Thanks be to God.**

## **Proclamation**

**All Singing: 78 “Of the Father’s Love Begotten”**  
*Singing verses 1, 2, and 4*

Scripture: John 1: 10-18

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Minister: The Word of the Lord.  
**All: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: God in Flesh

**All Singing: 95 “What Child is This”**

## **Dedication**

Prayers of the People

**All Singing: 100 “Jesus Light of the World”**  
*Singing verses 1, 2, and 4*

Benediction

### **Worship Leaders**

Pianist / Vocalist:	Erin Pacheco
Organist / Flutist:	Lynn Hollender
Liturgist:	Sally Larsen
Prayer:	Dave Larsen
Sound / Video:	Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister:	Roger Nelson

Hymns are from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)  
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Text: John1: 10-18  
Title: God in Flesh  
Date: 01.03.21  
Roger Allen Nelson

On the first morning of every new year a church youth group in Wisconsin engages in a Trinitarian ritual. They go out onto a frozen lake carrying a three-foot saw with three-inch teeth and cut a hole through the two-foot thick ice. Then they strip down to their shorts and jump in. They quickly scramble out to a sauna in a cabin on the shore to sit in the steam until their skin is a healthy sweaty pink. Then they repeat the process. They do this three times – a trinity.

David Dragseth, the pastor who tells this story, claims he leads the charge. There's probably some ecclesiastical exaggeration, but he maintains that as they've jumped into the frigid waters the youth group developed theological monikers for the various immersions. The first is the "baptismal pre-dunk." The second is the "incarnation." The third is "Lutherans rising."

Intrigued by the choice of "incarnation" for the second dunk, Dragseth asked about the title's genesis. The youth group leader replied:

*Pastor, think about it. It's minus 20 outside. It's an ice hole in a frozen lake in the middle of January in Wisconsin. All thinking drives down to one thought and one thought only: I am flesh and my flesh is freezing. And do you know what? That sauna afterward feels like salvation.*

It's a memorable image.

Dunked in the flesh.

Frozen in the flesh.

Salvation in the flesh.

Crazy Wisconsin Lutherans in the flesh....

The Gospel of John proclaims that God became flesh in Jesus.

God jumped in, all the way in, into our humanity.

God splashed into creation in an almost sensual way.

God not as spirit, but God as flesh.

God not as an idea, but God as wrinkled, burned, frail, soft, blistered, calloused, fleshy, human.

And, salvation not as knowledge but salvation as flesh.

Diaper-rashed baby flesh,

pimpled adolescent flesh,

muscle-man flesh,

bruised-bloodied-crucified flesh,

cold dead flesh,

resurrected flesh.

But you know all this. This is not new news for a new year. We wait for it every Advent and celebrate it every Christmas. We sing of it and sacrament it. And we confess it....

There are three creeds held in common by all Christians. Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic churches all affirm the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. All three are at the root of the Christian tree.

The Athanasian Creed, in particular, defines or defends the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. It gives confessional shape to God as flesh. Listen to this section of this creed from the late 400s:

*Now this is the true faith: That we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally.*

*He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity; less than the Father as regards humanity.*

That is not as colorful as Lutherans jumping in a lake in winter. In fact, it is probably the sort of theological formulation that stalls a sermon with a deadening thud and the sort of doctrinal distinction that seems disconnected from the struggle to be healthy, happy, and live with meaning in the new year. But, let me suggest (again) that this splashing of God into humanity, this God in flesh thing, is the central-crucial-mystery of Christian scripture. This is at the heart of it all: Who and what manner of being is Jesus Christ?

For my money the miracles, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, etcetera, all of that is secondary to the incarnation.

As Jesus is fully God and fully human....

As God slipped into this world in Jesus in a uniquely singular way...  
then everything else is like rolling over.

Everything else is frosting.

Of course, there are all sorts of interpretations of the incarnation. It's a mystery that's understood differently by many of you. It's a substantial stumbling block for scholars and skeptics. It's a mystery that Jesus neither identifies nor dispels. And, it's such a mystery that even our text has it that he came to his own (humanity) and his own did not receive him. At its very inception this is a mystery not easily swallowed.

So, my point here?

The mystery of God in flesh is not stale dogma or fluffy fairytale, but it has a creation-affirming physical quality. It means that God so loved humanity that he sawed a hole through the icy distance and jumped in. It means that God pursues us. It means that we don't reach toward God but that God reaches toward us.

As John Calvin puts it:

*But who could thus reach to him? Could any of the sons of Adam? Could any of the angels?*

*What then? The case was certainly desperate, if the Godhead itself did not descend to us, it being impossible for us to ascend. Thus, the Son of God behooved to become our Emmanuel, the God with us; and in such a way, that by mutual union his divinity and our nature might be combined; otherwise, neither was the proximity near enough, nor the affinity strong enough, to give us hope that God would dwell with us; so great was the repugnance between our pollution and the spotless purity of God....*

He goes on. You get the point. God pursues us not with law and lecture, not with idea and proverb, not with creed and requirement, but as a person, as flesh.

So, ours is a physical, sensual gospel. Ours is a God who “washed dusty feet, smelled extravagant perfume, made abundant wine, had his guts churned in weeping, raised a putrid Lazarus, asked a friend to stick his hand in his wounded side, and ate grilled fish on the lakeshore.” (David Dragseth) What we have is a God who understands, empathizes, feels, and knows what means to human. Ours is a God who lives, breathes, laughs, weeps, sings and dies.

In the last days of 2020, we set records for people dying of COVID-19. 3,600 one day. 3,800 the next day. 3,400 the day after that. And while I’ve heard all the arguments that the numbers are inflated, the people had other health issues, more people die because of lock downs and isolation, our faith and freedoms are being impinged for a statistically insignificant number of deaths....

I am still staggered by how many lives are being lost. The daily toll is mind numbing. We’ve lived with this virus for almost a year. We’ve developed vaccines and better treatment protocols and yet for some the virus sets up shop and shuts down their bodies. Many are elderly, many are black or brown and poor, most die out of our sight. I don’t know how to respond to or lament those losses. Our indifference and sense of inconvenience seems abhorrent. Our fallenness and the frailty of our flesh are on full display....

As I understand it many die of COVID by a sort of suffocation. The body’s strength to breathe is choked out. And circumstances in hospitals and nursing homes have meant that many died alone – cut off from loved ones.

The gospels proclaim that the Creator of the cosmos became flesh and died ultimately by suffocation, forsaken and alone....

Therefore, the mystery or majesty of the incarnation means that God is not indifferent to our fallenness and frailty but knows – even beyond empathy – who we are and what we experience. God in Christ knows our fears, our suffering, our loneliness and losses, our flawed and feeble flesh.

So, while the incarnation is a metaphysical mystery and a logical impossibility, it also means that God loves us enough to fully know us. Can we take consolation, comfort, or hope in that gospel truth?

Our translation is sort of weak and watered down. Our text reads that we have received “grace in place of grace already given.” But, the sense of the passage, maybe translated with some bite, is: grace upon grace, grace squared, grace cubed, grace multiplied, grace piled on grace, grace overflowing....

We will never be able to jump the distance up to God.  
God jumps down to us.  
God affirms your flesh and comes to you in Jesus.  
God knows and loves the fullness of you.  
Grace upon grace.  
Thanks be to God.

One last thing....

Erin, Schuyler, and I were pretty pleased with the little Christmas Eve production we pulled together. We're grateful for so many who offered help and gift and image. But, again, for my money, the video also highlighted what's lost right now. It was a reminder of the richness that we miss.

The blessing of children opening a service,  
The glory of live music – a choir in full voice,  
The joy of greeting friends in the narthex,  
The messy complexity, color and conflict of people together in the flesh.

For, dear friends, Jesus is not alone in this incarnation business.

One of the implications of God in the flesh is that our faith is lived out in the flesh. Ours is not a virtual faith, but an incarnational faith. It doesn't lift us up out of the flesh but grounds us in the flesh. The affirmation of creation in the incarnation means that we are called to live, worship, serve, and jump in together....

Not just as ideas or as solitary individuals, but in the flesh, in solidarity with those who are wrinkly and stinky, bruised, burned, battered and frail, weathered and frozen.

As God in Christ pursues us may we pursue one another, even through the thickest ice.  
As the love of God in Christ is incarnate, so too may we bear the love of God in our flesh.

Amen.