

Text: John 1: 9-18
Title: Incarnation Implication
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Roger Allen Nelson

My daughter picked-up my wife's gift for decorating, setting a table, and creating a beautiful home. She loves to putter, consult books and magazines, and dabble in design and English antiques. She then posts how she's transforming a room, or what she's baking, and with a great eye for photography, her little corner of the social media world seems to be fun and flourishing.

But when my daughter is done, she's done. Done done. In her mind the Christmas season runs from Thanksgiving to Christmas. So, on the 26th she's taking down decorations and hauling the tree outside. Christmas is over. Done. There's another project to get to. And pity the fool who gets in her way.

But, according to the liturgical calendar, not the decorating calendar, Christmas is not over....
We get 4 weeks of Advent to voice our longing and waiting on God. Lent offers 40 days to examine our frailty and failings. We get 6 weeks after Easter to bask in the light of the resurrection and better than 20 weeks after Pentecost to swim in the poured-out Spirit. But we only get 12 days of Christmas to dismantle decorations, finish the eggnog, and sit with the mystery of the incarnation.

Well, dear friends, if my count it right, today is the 9th day – bring on the ladies dancing! We're still in 12 days of wonder about what a New York Times columnist put this way:

...what Christians claim at Christmas is astonishing. It's weird. We celebrate that God — the full and actual God — had a body, grew leg hair, cried salty tears, and breathed ordinary air. Not only that but that the full and actual God was a baby, an embryo, lacking all autonomy, utterly dependent and vulnerable. There are other stories from the ancient world of gods or godlike beings who copulate with mortals and birth a demigod hero. But Christians make the strange claim that the one true Creator became, not only a human and not only a baby, but one in poverty, with no great strength or power, a child born to a lower-class family, an ethnic minority, who lived under an oppressive and violent imperial power. He was marginalized and despised and died the shameful death of a criminal.

That seems like a mystery that will require more than 12 days. Fortunately, the gospel reading for today takes us back to the first chapter in John.

Consider....

John opens his gospel not with story, genealogy, or geography. He doesn't begin with colorful characters under the starry-night-skies of the West Bank hills. John starts with poetry that swings for the fences.

There is no bigger stage, no farther reach, and no broader sweep than the first verses of the Gospel of John. He goes from beginning to eternity, from nothing to everything, from Word to world, from darkness to light. Try to imagine something more grandiose.

Frederick Buechner suggests there are actually two voices in our text. There's the poet's voice – it's a voice sung not said, a hymn not a homily. And, then there's the second voice – “insistent, over-earnest, a little nasal.” It's the voice that keeps interrupting about John. There are two voices. As Buechner puts it:

It is good to have both the voices. The sound the second voice makes is the very human sound, and you need a very human sound to get your bearings in the midst of the first voice's unearthly music. It is also good to have the interruptions. There should be interruptions in sermons too: the sound of a baby crying, a toilet being flushed – something to remind us of just what this flesh is that the Word became, the Word that was with God, that was God. What it smells and sounds and tastes like, this flesh the Word buckled on like battle dress. (When the body and blood is raised in communion it seems fitting for the church janitor to walk through with a vacuum cleaner.)

And therein lies the mystery. It is one thing to say that the Word was with God and was God, but it is entirely something else to claim that the fullness of God is embodied in the same skin as plump babies and muscled athletes, as those pimpled and those palsied, as porn stars and presidents.

Other monotheistic faiths accept that God communicates with humanity.

God speaks through prophets, scripture, and Spirit. God spoke to Abraham in a burning bush, gave Moses stone tablets, and whispered to Jeremiah. God whisked Muhammad up to heaven for a vision and dictated commandments to Joseph Smith. Other religions revel in revelation. God speaks through messengers and missives. But, the central claim of Christianity is not a message but a person. God is embodied. God as one of us. God dwelling on earth. God incarnate.

To return to a Neil Plantinga quote we've visited before:

God with a thumbprint and, for all we know, seasonal hay fever. Trying to describe the novelty of the incarnation, the New Testament writers borrowed from every source they could think of. They borrowed from wisdom literature and prophecy; they borrowed from history, poetry, and apocalypse. They strained to describe one who was simultaneously the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being and was also a particular Jew, the son of Mary, a man who had not especially impressed the people he grew up with.

It's easy to side step the mystery of the incarnation as fantasy or fairy-tale, or dismiss it as metaphor or myth, but let us not shrug it off for something more manageable. Let's not try to make the claim less monstrous...

Rather, let's live with the incredulity, the logical impossibility, and the breathtaking possibility that God visited earth as a particular and peculiar person: Jesus of Nazareth – full of grace and truth.

Now, truth be told, there are all sorts of ways to live in response to that claim. I have dear friends – thoughtful faithful folks with good hearts – who approach this very differently. And I am not suggesting that belief in dogma is essential for communion, or that if reason or some other reading of this mystery gets in the way that we're cut off from one another and from God. I know enough to know that I don't know it all....

However, the best I can do with this mystery is hope, trust, long for, and proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth is fully God and fully human. The best I can do is join Mary in treasuring this in my heart.

Rather than require confident belief, intellectual assent, or full understanding let us hold the mystery gently. What we can't explain or contain, let us tend to with openness, wonder, and confessional humility. May we be no different than Mary, who not knowing what to make of it, pondered, sang, waited, loved, and treasured both the promise and the pain of Jesus.

There's a curious line at the end our text. John writes:

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.

That line locates Jesus snuggled-up next to God. The phrase "in closest relationship" can be rendered more literally as "*into the bosom*" of God. The operable word here is "bosom." It also gets translated as "close to the Father's heart." Some theologians link the phrase to the tenderness of woman nursing a child. You would be hard pressed to conjure up a more intimate image. Jesus dwells at the bosom of the Father.

And the only other time that "bosom" is used in the Gospel of John is when Jesus washes the disciples' feet and then predicts his betrayal. There it reads, "the disciple whom Jesus loved was reclining next to him." The general consensus is that John is referring to himself. The one whom Jesus loved was at his bosom....

John at Jesus' bosom. Jesus at God's bosom.

The implication is a kind of intimacy.

The implication is that Jesus knows the heart of God.

Therefore, despite our indifference, lack of recognition, or resistance, if you want to know God – look to Jesus.

Dear friends, we'll never fully grasp the incarnation. We can struggle, talk, and treasure this mystery until we've run out of curiosity or spiritual zest. But, quite frankly, the Bible doesn't seem to make that big a deal about what we think about the nature Jesus....

What the gospels do offer is a robust picture of the way and words of Jesus. And in turn we are called to be disciples of Jesus. I'm not sure framing the theological nuance of the nature of Jesus matters as much as following Jesus. I'm not sure that theological clarity is as crucial as discipleship. Jesus doesn't make many claims about who he is, but he does call us to a way of being.

That said (and rightly that made many of you squirm), the incarnation has another essential implication that is worthy of our consideration.

That God in Christ is human, that the fullness of divinity is invested in the fullness of humanity – in one particular human – suggests that all humanity has divine worth. Tish Harrison Warren puts it this way:

The church slowly discovered (and has had to rediscover time and time again) that God becoming a specific human being changes our understanding of humanity itself. Therefore, dignity is not reserved to only one nationality, gender, or class. Rather, the human body is a holy thing to be protected (no matter whose body it is), and the value of the weak is more important than the prerogatives of the powerful.

That is to say that the incarnation is evidence not of an abstraction, or a set of theological principles, but of a God who so dearly loved fleshy, beautiful, broken, humanity that he became one of us.

There is not an expression of humanity that isn't loved by God in Christ. The flesh God assumed was not of the powerful, the victorious, or those on the right side of the empire. The flesh God assumed was not of the well-heeled, but when the Word became flesh and set up camp among us, he found his place with the hungry, the thirsty, the enslaved, the misguided, the guilty, the dead.

As we turn from Christmas to the hopes of a new year may we treasure this mystery in our hearts and may we affirm, protect, and love the bodies of the weak, the vulnerable, the poor, the other.

In doing so, may we follow the way of the incarnation....
Amen.