

## WORD BECOME FLESH

Christmas 1, Year B: Isaiah 61:10-62:3  
Psalm 147  
John 1:1-14

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**Key Passage:** *And the Word became flesh and lived among us.* (John 1:14a)

*As a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.* (Isaiah 61:11)

When I was growing up, my parents had a good friend who was an artist, working mainly as a print-maker. Every year her Christmas card was an original woodcut. The designs were different each time, based on some part of the Biblical Christmas stories, literally or figuratively. There was also a graphic detail that did not vary. Somewhere in each design she would work in a tiny cross. When I was young, it became a game—a “Where’s Waldo?”—to find the cross. Later, I began to wonder why she would include this symbol as part of her Christmas greeting. It seemed like sort of a downer.

Our Gospel today—the prologue to John’s Gospel—is all about symbolism. No real narratives, no mangers, stars, shepherds, angels—not even a baby. Just the poetry of a creating Word, light in the darkness, children adopted by God, and the glory of God made flesh. And the foreboding that we feel when the writer acknowledges that this giver of life is rejected by the very recipients of that life. That is the shadow of the cross that hangs over the picture that John paints.

We have come here today ready to rejoice in the light. We have come through the weeks of preparation, the beauty of carols and greens encouraging us on, culminating in Christmas celebrations with a blaze of activity, children, song, beauty, and banquet. This Sunday we seek a quieter, but no less real, celebration. And John speaks to us.

Out of the darkness, light. Not the light that we manufacture by sweat and strain. But the glorious light that is given to us. The shining presence of divinity come near. The overwhelming and inexplicable realization that God has come to us and will not ever leave us. Emmanuel: God-with-us. The Maker of the cosmos—the planets, the winds, the trees, the animals—is willing to be even closer to us humans. To walk into the confusing, mysterious, beautiful, heartbreaking lives that each of us is given. To be human, so that we can see more clearly what humanity can be.

God's presence with us through Jesus—the theological term is Incarnation—is the sign of God's enduring love for us. And for that love to be demonstrably reliable, the darkness must also be real. Jesus doesn't get a "pass" on suffering because he is the Word made flesh. So the shadow of the cross must hang over his life, as darkness and death hang over all human life. The gift of Christ illumines that life, the dark corners as well as the bright joys. The promise is that there is no place beyond the reach of God's light. The love that creates the stars and the seas is the love that draws us ever closer to the heart of the creator, where we find ourselves deeply cherished. It is the love that gives us the courage to live together with forgiveness and open hearts. That has the power to shine despite the heartache and disappointment and loss that come to all of us as part of living.

This has been a dark year in many ways. Our yearning for the light of Christ is poignant as we reflect on lives lost to senseless violence, to grinding poverty and income inequality, to racism and intolerance, to cruel disease, fires, and destructive wind and water, to uncivil public dialogue, to fears of the other magnified into blind anger. "O come, o come Emmanuel."

We arrive at the manger, drawn by a star, or an angel, or a song, or by something so deep inside us that we cannot even name it. And we place all our yearnings and our dreams and our prayers at the feet of a tiny baby. We need John's expansive vision to steady us as we come, revealing the great mystery of God's presence that grows bigger than we can imagine, big enough to overcome our fears, our sense of futility, our despair at the mess we have made of God's great gifts to us. An assurance that this tiny baby is the Word made flesh, the power that can free us to find ourselves as beloved children of God.

Realizing that God has chosen to come among us as part of suffering humanity inspires wonder in us. Perhaps you know the Christmas carol, "I wonder as I wander." The words are attributed to John Jacob Niles, an American musicologist from the last century. He worked with a fragment he had heard sung by people in the mountains of Appalachia: "I wonder as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die, for poor ornery people like you and like I. I wonder as I wander out under the sky." If you know anything about life in that part of the world, you know it is coal-mining country, where dangerous work, desperate poverty, substance addiction, and environmental disaster are part of daily life. There is no illusion in these folk about the reality of suffering. Jesus coming to live among humans is a cause for breathless wonder and deep gratitude.

Christmas invites us to step over a threshold, holding onto our wonder and our yearning. The signs of light in the darkness draw us in, the promise of new life at its source gives us hope. We gather to hear the familiar story, to see in each other's eyes the truth of God's love, to receive the symbols of that love in bread

and wine, and to resolve to work courageously to bear that light for each other and the world.

Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah offers us comfort as we come. The words are spoken to a people who have lost their homeland and their Temple, exiled for over a generation in a foreign land. The prophet offers a hopeful vision of a new Jerusalem, a place where God calls us again to live in righteousness, that is, in right relationship with our Creator and with each other. Zion will be vindicated. God has not given up on the chosen people. New life, springing up as fresh shoots in a garden, are signs of God's justice and mercy. Nothing is hopeless in God's hands.

Katherine Paterson is an award-winning author of fiction, primarily for young people. Some years ago she spoke to a gathering of high school teachers. Her words can speak to our work with young people through the Trinity Boston Foundation, and indeed to all of us at Trinity Church who strive to be lights in the darkness for people regardless of age. Here are her words:

*What I hope to say to isolated, angry, fearful youth—to all the children who feel that their lives are worthless in the eyes of the world is this: you are seen, you are not alone, you are not despised, you are unique and of infinite value in the human family. As a writer, I can try to offer children a chance to make sense of their own life through the words of a story, but I can't stop there, thinking that my task is done. Nor, I dare say, can you. It is up to each of us not simply to **write** the words, but to **be** a word of hope made flesh.*

(Katherine Paterson, "Are You there, God?" in *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2006*, ed. Zaleski, p. 210)

Most of you know that Phillips Brooks, the rector who worked with Richardson to design this church, is the author of the carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Brooks was inspired to write the words on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1865. Coming from the chaotic times of the American Civil War, he was inspired by the then-peaceful town. In that context, and in today's heartbreak over the lack of peace in Bethlehem, we join with Brooks to affirm: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek hearts will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in."

The Word made flesh has the strength to draw us into God's powerful love. The rejection and suffering that are foreshadowed on this happiest of days are signs of God's steadfastness. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. In the darkness, the light shows most clearly, in stark relief against the shadows. That is the precious gift we receive today. And day by day, week by week, we affirm that gift as we draw closer to God's heart and learn what it

means to find our true humanity. That is the source of our joy, the light that we glimpse in our own hearts and in those around us, the light that reflects from the radiance of the Word made flesh. “Joy to the world; the Lord is come.”