

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.¹⁵ John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ”¹⁶ From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known. (John 1:14-18)

The Word Became Flesh

For some of you, today is the third consecutive day that you’ve been to church. Now, to be honest, I’m glad that Christmas only falls on a Tuesday once every seven or eight years. But year after year, we do have three services during this week. If you did come to church on Sunday and then last night for Christmas Eve, you already began to hear the message that John’s gospel focuses on today: the Word became Flesh. On Sunday, we heard how John the Baptist leaped in his mother’s womb when the unborn Christ entered his home and then the Virgin Mary sang of the incredible miracle God was doing in her. Last night, we heard that the child she conceived was both her child and the Son of God. Today, we are going to return to that miracle once again, because that’s what Christmas is truly about. I hope that doesn’t seem like overkill because there is value in hearing one more time of the mystery of the Incarnation. That’s the big, scary theological word for what we celebrate at Christmas. It is indeed the greatest miracle God ever did for us. Today, we want to see that miracle for what it is and what it means. **The Word became Flesh.**

I.

By sheer coincidence, a week or so before school got out, we talked about John chapter one in catechism class. We looked at the first couple of verses, where John introduces this concept of “the Word.” What does he mean by that? “The Word” in this chapter is not the written word that God gave us, although in many chapters of the Bible that’s exactly what it means. Here, the Word means Jesus. Or perhaps it would be better to say it almost means Jesus. You see, the name “Jesus” was given to the Lord by the angel Gabriel. He told both Mary and Joseph to name the child Jesus, and he explained the reason to Joseph, “Because he will save his people from their sins.” He said that because the name Jesus could be very freely translated as “Savior.” But before the angel gave that name to Mary and Joseph, no one ever called the Son of God by that name. No Old Testament verse uses that name for the Savior. Jesus is the name God gave his Son when he entered the world. But the gospel of John does not begin with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. It begins in eternity, at the very beginning of the creation of the world. So to make the point that his Son always existed, God does not call him “Jesus” when he’s talking about him before he came into this world. He calls him “the Word.”

Why does he call him that? Well, what do we use words for? To communicate, right? That’s really the point. All through the Old Testament, God strove to communicate with us. He put his thoughts and his plans into human language. He gave us the 39 books of the Old Testament and all the rituals and laws that he commanded his people to follow and the tabernacle and the temple all so that his people would understand him and his love. He continued in the New Testament to communicate to us through the written word and also through the sacraments of baptism and communion. But the greatest communication of God and his love is Christ. He is the whole point of all 66 books of the Bible. Even baptism and communion give and seal faith in Christ. And Christ, Jesus, Immanuel, the Word communicates God the Father to us.

How does he do that? John says, “**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**” What does it mean that the Son of God became flesh? He didn’t stop being God. But he did add a real human nature to himself. The Holy Spirit caused Mary to conceive and at that moment the Son of God took that human nature into himself. So Jesus was fully human even as he was fully God. The Word became flesh means that God lived among us as a real human being. John says, “He made his dwelling among us.” A very literal translation would be, “He tented among us.” God put on flesh and lived the life we have to live.

Once I was preaching in Lent on the fact that God died on the cross and after church, a child asked me, “How did God die on the cross? I thought Jesus died on the cross.” His confusion could be echoed here. Often, when we say “God” – even when the Bible says “God” – we mean God the Father. But understand that

God isn't just the Father. Each person of the Trinity is wholly and completely God. So God the Son is God. God the Holy Spirit is that one God. The Son of God lived among us means that God lived among us because the Son is God, just like the Father is God.

That's pretty hard to wrap your head around, isn't it? I struggle to communicate these truths clearly. John the Baptist pointed to Christ and he said it this way, **"This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"** John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus. But he knew that the Word existed long before he did. Jesus is God. He is the Son of God. And Jesus tented among us. He was a real human being – he still is a real human being. And he has lived our human life. He stood in for us and lived the perfect human life God demands from each of us.

The Apostle John says, **"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** When people saw Jesus, they didn't see rays of glory streaming from his face. They saw a real, Jewish man. But every time he did a miracle, they saw a hint of his power and glory as God. On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus showed Peter, James and John his glory as the Son of God. But there is more to it than that. John said, **"No one has ever seen God,"** meaning God the Father, **"but God the One and Only,"** or God the Only Begotten, that is God the Son, **"who is at the Father's side, has made him known."**

In Christ, we see the true glory of God. No human being can see God in this life. Even Moses had to content himself with seeing God from behind because God said that no one can see his face and live. If we were to face God in all his glory, we sinners would die. That is the truest indication of how bad off we are. But God wants us to be his children. God wants us to see him, so God communicated himself to us in a way that we can see. The Word became flesh. Christ came. And in him, we see the glory of God. We see the Creator of the universe moving heaven and earth to be with us. We see the Judge of all Mankind sacrificing his Son so that he doesn't have to call us guilty. We see the infinite, all powerful God who fills the heavens and the earth, squeezing into the body of a baby boy – and doing that when that body was just a single cell in his mother's womb. That's what John was talking about. **The Word became flesh. In him we see God's glory.**

II.

The heart of that glory isn't the blazing light that the apostles saw on the mount of transfiguration. It isn't the fire and smoke that covered Mt. Sinai when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Those things were manifestations of God's glory. But the heart of his glory is his love. God's glory is the love of the Father that gave his only begotten Son so that we are bought and paid for. God's glory is the love of the Son of God to be born in a stable, to live as a child of sinners, to walk around as a nobody in a world that he owned, to allow hypocrites to convict him of crimes he didn't commit, to allow soldiers to scourge him and nail him to a cross, to submit while his Father poured all our sins on his head and then to give up his spirit and die in our place. And God's glory is the love of the Holy Spirit that comes to hardened sinners like us, in the waters of baptism, in the spoken word, in the bread and wine of communion, and reaches into our hearts and gives and strengthens our faith in him.

In Christ, we see the true glory of God. John says, **"From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another."** This verse is quite difficult to translate. The new version of the NIV probably did a better job when it said, **"Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given."** That sounds very different, but I think it gets us closer to the point because John goes on to say, **"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."**

In the Old Testament, God did speak. God did come on Mt. Sinai in fire and smoke and the Bible does call that the glory of the Lord. But at Mt. Sinai, God built that glory into the law. Now understand, the Mt. Sinai law was intended to lead God's people to Christ. Everything about it was intended to create a mentality that would see their sin and see their Savior. All those sacrifices and rituals were pictures of Jesus' work. But year after year, God required them to do things and to not do things to prepare their thinking. I suppose you could compare it to parents who make small children go to church. Surely we all realize that forcing them to sit here and eat Cheerios to keep quiet doesn't actually teach them about Jesus. But bringing them Sunday after Sunday and Christmas after Christmas does prepare them to spend their lives hearing God's word. The Old Covenant was full of laws that were designed to lead God's people to the gospel.

But that gospel – what John calls "Grace and truth" – came through Jesus Christ. Out of the fullness of Christ – out of all that he is and all his love for us – God has given us a new grace in place of the old grace of

Mt. Sinai. What is grace? It's God's undeserved love. It's a gift he gives us. At Mt. Sinai, God did give his people a gift. But in Bethlehem, God gave the world a greater gift: forgiveness and life. God gave the world his Son who lived and died and rose to bring us home to heaven.

Christmas is about our sin. It's about the fact that every day, we earn God's wrath forever. I bet you saw that yesterday or today. Who was whining about what they got or didn't get? Who was jealous? Who was hurt or angry or exhausted or disappointed by the way the Christmas celebration went this year? Who got drunk or argued or fought? All those things are symptoms of the real problem: we are sinners and we deserve God's wrath for all eternity. But Christmas tells us that God has solved that problem. He sent his only begotten Son into this world to live the perfect life that we can never live, to die and suffer even hell on the cross to pay all that we owe for all that sin and selfishness, and then to rise and declare that all our sin is gone forever. And through that message he brings us home to heaven. That's what Christmas means. **The Word became flesh. In him we receive grace and truth.**

Truth is a funny word. In many cases, we cannot know what it true. What really happened in the body of a person in the hospital? Getting a doctor to definitively say what it is and what it isn't can be a tough job, because they just don't know. And they don't want to say something that's untrue. Figuring out who is telling the truth when two people are arguing is almost hopeless. We even have a expression for it: it's a "he said/she said" situation. In other words, we can't know the truth. But in Christ, we have the truth. We have the glory of God in human flesh. We have the promise that all our sins are forgiven and we will live with him forever. Have a blessed Christmas. Amen.