

“Veiled in Flesh”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2011

John 1: 1-5, 10-14
Luke 2: 1-7

If you are here this evening all relaxed, unstressed, and without a worry in the world, then I bet you are in a very small minority. For almost all of us, our lives are not “Currier and Ives” holiday cards; they are not romantic and idyllic. Our lives are full of imperfections, chaos, and stress. We are here with anxiety, concern, and worry. We are kidding ourselves if we believe we can just leave our real lives out in the car and be in a perfect frame of mind when we walk into this room.

And yet all too often, we yearn for that idyllic Christmas so much that we create mythical expectations which we feel must be met. While some traditions are meaningful year after year, others might lose their impact over time. But how often do we press forward with every family tradition, as if those acts will create the sentiments of the past? In our drive to find peace and happiness amid all the chaos, we often cling to abstractions of “traditions” or “we have to do this,” hoping those memories of happiness might replace our actual feelings of angst or stress.

We do the same in the church. We remember with longing how certain programs brought new people in years ago, and so we continue with those “traditions,” yearning for similar results today. Yet the people are different, the circumstances are different, and it is our emotional yearning for the happiness of the past which guides our decision-making. And we certainly tend to romanticize this night in the church’s retelling of Christ’s birth. We’ve heard the story so many times, the stark realities of it tend to fade away in our memories. We remember what we want to remember: a peaceful setting, the holy family’s portrait, angels singing in the hills.

Consider for a moment not what we romanticize this night to be. Consider for a moment what this night actually was like.

Consider the smells of the barn which stay with you for days; the damp, moist ground which is like walking in quick sand; the animals which are everywhere, and don’t care if you are in their way. Some of you may be able to relate to those sights and smells from growing up on farms as children.

Now, take those memories – those smells, those sights, those sounds – and put a lonely man and a pregnant woman in the middle of them. There are no places in the local inns for them to stay. They are tired, hungry, and scared. The man knows the woman could go into labor at any time, and yet there is nowhere of comfort for them to rest and sleep. An innkeeper offers for them to stay behind his building, in a barn which is not protected from the elements. There are cows, sheep, and chickens, not to mention mice, with

whom they have to share space. And all they can use for a bed is the straw on the ground to cushion their weight. It is cold, it is dirty, it is crowded and rustic. It is far from glamorous or romantic.

That is the scene of Jesus' birth. The Son of God is born to an unwed couple in the dirtiest, the lowliest, the smelliest of places. Not some abstract image or idea; but a very real, human, rough experience.

As Christians, it is much easier to keep this night in abstraction, to keep the birth of Jesus romanticized. For when we keep Christmas abstract, we cannot offend or trample on another's experience of Christ's birth.

Henry Langknecht writes: *In Philippians 2, Paul prophesies that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. That I can imagine. The name of Jesus does unite. But the name is an abstract linguistic marker. As long as the actual Jesus to whom that name refers dwells only in our abstract Christifications, we celebrate Christmas in safety. We are safe from the offensive particularity of the embodiment; each of us can design an acceptable Jesus avatar in our minds.*

Mary didn't give birth to an avatar or a name or an idea. Mary didn't give birth to a host of representative samples of humanity's diversity. Mary gave birth to one human baby whose annoying specificity warns us and protects us, first from worshipping only our favorite icon, and second from worshipping only the cosmic Christ . . .

Incarnation is a scandal because by refusing to look like we imagine him, Jesus others us all. If Mary's child of God is male, he is not female; if he's left-handed, he's not right-handed. Jesus embodied is the inconvenient truth. If we are to enjoy genuine Christmas unity, it will not be in gazing up in bliss at celestial glory but in looking together at that confounding child (*Christian Century*, December 13, 2011, 21).

This night is not only about childhood memories or family traditions. This night is not only about hearing beautiful music or experiencing a darkened sanctuary illuminated by candlelight. Ultimately, this night is about one thing: a merciful God's decision to come and meet us in our weak, fragile, human form. This night is about God's incarnation in Jesus Christ our Lord.

John speaks of Jesus as God's Word. John speaks words which illicit images that on the surface can seem abstract and difficult to relate to. "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God; He was in the beginning with God; all things came into being through him." But while on the surface John's words might sound abstract, they in fact point to a very real, personal and true experience of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *What are words? Just sounds with air behind them. Truth is something else altogether. Only, that is where this Word made flesh is different. In him, the Word is not a unit of speech. It is a way of life, a certain way of being that speaks louder than words. This Word does not deliver medical lectures to sick people; this Word heals them. This Word does not hand out neatly printed recipes to hungry people; this Word*

feeds them. This Word does not leave inspirational tracts lying on the bedside tables of those who are dying; this Word raises them from the dead.

This incarnate Word does what he says and says what he does. In him, word and reality become one thing . . . If you want to know how God looks, look at him. If you want to know how God sounds, listen to him. If you want to know how God acts, watch him. This is God's Word in action . . . In God's eternal search for the best way to speak with us, this is what the best looks like: an incarnate word, a word made flesh, named Jesus, the Christ (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, #1, Year B, p.5).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

This night is when we meet God in the flesh: living in our midst; crying in a stable; running around his parents’ home; teaching men and women new things; sharing grace through a gentle touch or a caring look; breaking a loaf of bread, pouring a glass of wine; experiencing physical pain; suffering a human death.

This night is when we experience God’s glory and grace in the flesh: the real peace which calms us in chaos; the true comfort which reassures us in distress; the real grace which offers forgiveness when we hurt one another; the genuine love which unites us not just through a name, but through God in flesh and bones.

This night is our moment to reaffirm what we believe – as the church, as children of God – that God is more than an abstract, idyllic expectation. God is with us – yesterday, today, tomorrow, and for eternity – through his eternal Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Or as the familiar carol puts it:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity, Pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel (“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!” Verse 2).

Alleluia! Amen.