

## The Ongoing Incarnation

The opening verses of John's gospel are called the prologue. It is like an orchestral overture that states briefly but clearly the themes we will hear more fully as the performance unfolds. I do not remember ever attempting a sermon on John's prologue. It is one of the most moving and powerful portions in all of Christian scripture. I want to say, by way of honoring my New Testament Greek professor, our own Dr. Joseph Nelson, that the language of the New Testament is nowhere more elegant than in John's gospel and in these very verses. John's prologue stands fully and beautifully on its own, and attempts to explain or expound run the risk of mucking it up!

For today, I have lifted out what scholars believe to be an already existing poem or hymn being used in the Christian communities of John's time and place. John uses it as the substance of his prologue. He adds some commentary on John the Baptist, which I left out so that we might see the poem itself. Here it is:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

*All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
The light shines on in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.  
He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
yet the world did not know him.  
He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.  
But to all who received him, he gave power to become children of God.*

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us,  
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth.*

*From his fullness we have all received  
grace upon grace.*

*[1:1-5, 10-12, 14, 16]*

John's gospel differs from the other three gospels in a number of ways. For one thing, John wants to stress Jesus' divinity, his relationship to God. And yet, we need to be careful to hear what John is actually saying. During the Advent and Christmas season, the church habitually speaks about "God becoming a human being," that this is what it means that Jesus is God-with-us. Official church teaching about the incarnation has presented Jesus as a kind of God-man, the embodiment of God's substance, you might say, in human form. I must admit that this never made sense to

me. One problem is that this meaning of the incarnation distances Jesus from us. He is like Superman, only appearing to be like us, a divine being dressed in human clothes, swooping in to "save" us, and then swooping out again into heaven. I always felt that I was supposed to be impressed by this version of who Jesus was and the significance of his life for us. I was not impressed because I could not find the connection of Jesus' life with mine. When John says that the Word became "flesh", he means the fullness of human life in all its dimensions. Not posturing. Not posing. It is the real thing.

Another problem is that the "literal" incarnation of God in Jesus has little or no support in scripture itself. John's gospel is about as close as you get to such an idea. However, as much as John wants to emphasize Jesus' divinity, his closeness to God, he never does it in a way that makes Jesus different from us. Just the opposite. Jesus' divinity has to do with our divinity, as well. In John's view, Jesus as God's special child is with us in a way that empowers us also to be God's special children, God's daughters and sons. His unity with God is something we share, and we are called to seek it, claim it, and live out of it.

The poem says that in Jesus the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of God's truth and grace. The word "Word" has a special meaning in Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is not necessarily something verbal. Christianity has become a very wordy religion rather than a religion of the Word. God's Word in Hebrew scripture (*dabar*) is God's powerful, creating, energizing, wisdom-filled relationship with all of life, including us human beings. When God "speaks", something happens! Life springs forth. Justice emerges. Peace is established. Compassion fills hearts and societies. People are sometimes comforted, and sometimes warned. God's Word has to do with the awakening and energizing of a way and quality and shape of life. It has little or nothing to do with talking a lot about God or Jesus.

John's gospel uses a Greek word to carry over this meaning or sense of Word. It is *logos*, from which we get "logical". However, it means much more than reason or thinking. Our spiritual tradition is no more just about ideas--thinking a lot--than it is about words--talking a lot. The "word" as *logos* is more like wisdom and insight. The lectionary reading for today from the Letter to the Ephesians picks this up: *With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ....* So Jesus embodies wisdom that comes from God and our relationship with God. His spirit and teachings and life point us to our own lives as being created to have just this kind of wisdom and insight, this Word of God.

And that is where John wants to go with it. Jesus is the embodiment of God's Word, God's wisdom and insight, God's truth and grace, the energy of God's love. In him we see and are empowered to become who we really are as human beings, God's beloved children. This is where it is so crucial to remember that John is NOT saying that Jesus' divinity is something that separates him from us. He is God's presence with us, God's light dwelling among us, God's wisdom and truth shining in our lives. He is what it looks like when we live fully as God created us to live, as God's children. As we respond to Jesus as Word, as light, as life, as wisdom, we become who and what we truly are--children of God. Jesus' life can have the effect of waking us up to our own lives, our own truest identities. Jesus is "the true light, which

enlightens everyone"(v. 9). It depends upon us, how we respond, whether or not we DO respond.

John's gospel is saying a remarkable thing. To all and everyone who "receives" Jesus as embodying the presence of God's love, will, light, life, wisdom, and so forth, he gives the power to become children of God. In this, we see that we are and are to be born not of flesh and blood alone, nor from human society and culture and purposes. Our home is God. Our origin is God. This is another important theme of John's gospel: rebirth. It means recognizing and then living as those who know we are from God, that our life comes from God. We can live in one of two basic ways. We can sleepwalk our way through life, from beginning to end. We can go with the flow of cultural and religious habits and customs and fashions, drifting along like a leaf on the surface of a river. Or we can wake up to our own lives. That is who Jesus was and is for us. He is the one in whom God is waking us up to our true nature. And in our relationship with Jesus as his disciples, we experience the power to be who we really and truly are--God's daughters and sons.

This is what we are about when we work intentionally with the life of faith as an inward journey, from which flows the outward journey of our words, actions, ministries, relationships. The inward journey is the way we give attention to our relationship to Jesus. It is the way we continue to "receive" him, to open our lives to him, his teachings, his spirit, and the ways he empowers us to become who we really are. The incarnation of the Word in Jesus, so fully present in him, continues in us. It is the way we come to life, the way we wake up to who we really and truly are, the unique, precious, and beloved children of God.