

January 4, 2015 / Christmastide / David L. Edwards

### **The Ongoing Incarnation**

John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.*

The opening verses of John's gospel are called the prologue. It is like an orchestral overture that states briefly the themes that we will hear more fully throughout the performance. Here is one of the loftiest 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 and profound than in these verses. As I recall, we had to memorize at least the first few verses and recite them in class! John's prologue stands fully and beautifully on its own, and attempts to break it down and explain it run the risk of mucking it up! I think it is simply meant to be listened to with open hearts and minds, so that its images begin to awaken us to the light to which they point—the light that was in Jesus and the light that is in us, as well as throughout the universe. The light, the Word, of God.

The verses for today I lifted out to show what scholars believe to be an already existing poem or hymn in the Christian communities of John's time and place. John adds some words about John the Baptist. I left them out so that we might see the poem itself. I would like for us to listen to it again. I will add a little bit to some of the key words to give the fuller flavor of their meaning.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God. He [it, she] was in the beginning with God.  
All things came into being through him,  
and apart from him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being in the Word 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.*

*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.  
 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
 yet the world did not know [recognize, understand] him.  
 He came to his own people, yet they did not receive [welcome, take hold  
 of] him.  
 But to all who did receive him, who believed in [had faith or confidence  
 in] his name,  
 he gave power [authority, right, liberty] to become children of God, who  
 were born,  
 not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of human will, but of God.*

*And the Word became flesh and lived [dwelt, or literally pitched its tent]  
 among us,  
 and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,  
 full of grace and truth [and enduring love (Raymond E. Brown)].  
 From his fullness [completeness] we have all received, grace upon grace.  
 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who has made God  
 known.*

John's gospel is very different from the other three gospels. For one thing, John wants to stress Jesus' divinity, his close relationship to God. 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 the meaning of Jesus as God-with-us. Official church teaching about the Incarnation has presented Jesus as a kind of God-man, a blend of divine and human substance, or "stuff." This never made sense to me as I was growing up. Such an idea makes Jesus qualitatively different from us. I mean, Jesus then has a quality about him that we do not have. 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. That version of who Jesus was never grabbed me. There was no meaningful connection of Jesus' life with mine. When John says that the Word became "flesh" (*sarx*), he means the fullness of

human life in all its dimensions. Not posturing. Not posing. It is the real thing.

The big thing was, however, that the more I studied scripture, the less I found anything to support that notion of the Incarnation. John's gospel is about as close as you get. However, as much as John wants to emphasize Jesus' closeness to God, he never does it in a way that makes Jesus different from us. Just the opposite. Jesus' divinity, if you want to put it that way, has to do with our divinity, as well. In John's story, Jesus as God's special child 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. "Word" has a special meaning in Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is not necessarily something verbal. God's Word in Hebrew scriptures (*dabar*) is God's powerful, creating, energizing, wisdom-filled relationship with all of life, including us human beings. Psalm 147 is full of images of God's Word going forth, God's spirit or breath going out, and things happening. Life springs forth. The animals are fed. Children are blessed. Justice emerges. Peace is established. Compassion fills hearts and societies. People are sometimes comforted, sometimes challenged. 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. And, by the way, it has occurred to me in recent years that "Word" in our tradition has a counterpart in other religious traditions, like *Dharma* in Buddhism and *Tao* in Taoism. And Native American spirituality, as well as other native peoples and traditions, had no problem hearing God's voice in the wind or the song of the birds or the quiet beauty of a sunset.

John's gospel uses a Greek word to carry over this 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. I did not include in our service the reading for today from the Letter to the Ephesians. But here is a bit of it: *With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of God's 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. 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 we respond (v. 12—receive, welcome, take hold of) 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 truest life as human beings. Jesus is "the true light, which enlightens everyone"(v. 9). Our spiritual work is to open up to and receive the light that is shining all around us, and is in us but has been covered up, or hidden under a bushel basket, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6).

John's gospel is saying a remarkable thing. To all who "receive," who are open to, 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 only of flesh and blood, or of 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. In John's gospel, that is living in the dark. 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 as we are awakening, as persons and as a community, we experience the power to be who we really and truly are--God's daughters and sons. We start living in the light.

The Incarnation, you see, is on-going. God's Word--the Light, the Love of God--seeks to be embodied, to dwell, in us. I think we have experienced this. We have known at least one person who seemed so full of life, of love, of wisdom, of compassion, that she or he seemed illuminated from within. And just having known such persons, having been around them, awakened something in us, as well, even a little bit. I think that is what Jesus was and was about—living fully open to God and God's word, power, love, spirit—so that, in following him, learning from him, “receiving” or opening to him, we become more and more who we truly are as God's children.

This is what we are about as 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 sustained attention to Jesus. It is the way we continue to "receive" him, to open our lives to him, his teachings, his spirit, and his empowering of us to become who we really are. The incarnation of the Word in Jesus continues in us.