

January 3, 2016 / Christmastide / David L. Edwards

Incarnating the Word - The Reason for Our Spiritual Practice

John 1:1-5, 10-14 *And the Word became flesh and lived among us...*

Today's reading from the Gospel of John is one of the most majestic and spiritually potent in all our scriptures. The author uses the highest language to express the meaning and importance of Jesus' life. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four, begins the story of Jesus with Jesus' baptism by John, the beginning of his ministry. Matthew and Luke gathered stories of Jesus' birth and expressed in them the message of God's reign dawning in the places of poverty and humility, not of power and wealth and status. John contemplates God's presence and work in Jesus, pressing all the way to the beginning...of everything. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John says that Jesus is the embodiment of the Word of God. In Hebrew it is God's *dhabar*, something much more than verbal, a life-giving, creative power. In Jesus, the Word (*logos*, in the Greek) becomes flesh (*sarx*), expressing itself in human living. John is saying that Jesus' life was the very embodiment of God's dynamic, creative, life-giving Word. The rest of John's gospel says, essentially, that God's Word was not only embodied in Jesus, but is to be embodied in us, as well, as love. Jesus' life and teachings were about showing people that they were God's beloved children, created to embody God's Word of love and all that love means. That, I believe, is what we are about as a spiritual community in the tradition of Jesus—embodying the Word of God. What could be more exciting, meaningful, urgent, and life-fulfilling than that?

The Word became flesh and lived among us. Notice that the text does NOT say God became flesh and lived among us. We are in the season of Christmastide. We have heard all our lives that at Christmas we celebrate Jesus' birth as God becoming a human being. It is called the doctrine of the incarnation, literally "in-flesh-ment". It was many years before I realized that there is NOTHING in scripture about God

becoming a human being. A doctrine that emerged centuries after the life of Jesus says that Jesus was God incarnate, God taking on human flesh. But there is nothing in scripture about that. The doctrine is linked to another doctrine called “original sin”, that says we are born sinners and it takes a “God-man” to come and die for us so that we can be saved and go to heaven. Well, Jesus never talked about that kind of thing. You see what happens when you are taught to think that way? Jesus is God coming to save us from our basic sinfulness. Therefore, Jesus is essentially different from us, has nothing truly in common with us. Again, however, the scriptures do not talk that way. John's gospel is as close as it gets, and John writes that the Word became flesh and lived among us.

Why do I go into all of that? Because it is important, even essential, that Jesus' life and ministry have to do with THIS life and how we live it, not with some afterlife, some other world than this. It is important because Jesus, as we meet him in the gospels, is fully about calling people to be who they really and truly are—beloved children of God. He calls them to follow him in the life of human beings faithful to God and their brothers and sisters in love. He calls them to find what he called “eternal life” right here and now as they live as God created them to live. In John's terms, we come into our full humanity as we embody God's Word of life and love. Jesus is savior not because he is a “super-man” who rescues us out of our sinful selves and this sinful world, but because he opens up and shows us the way that leads to our true lives as human beings created by God to live in this beautiful, bountiful world that is God's good creation. He calls us to and leads us on the journey of embodying God's Word in our own lives, in our uniqueness as human beings, in our gifts, and the works of goodness and love to which we feel ourselves called. And that is what we are about as a community of faith.

Since coming to be part of this community as a member and minister, I have found this view of God's Word becoming flesh in Jesus and in our lives confirmed again and again, in my own life and in others. And I can say with deep gratitude that what I call God's Word and my actual life are closer together than when I arrived. I am more

my true self. I have more closely identified and then embraced what I feel is God's call in my life and what my gifts are for expressing that call. I am more self-accepting and less prone to sit in judgment on myself all the time, what I call practicing God's grace, God's unconditional love, in our own lives. Thus I am less consumed with myself and freer to be open to and loving of others. My view of life and of the church as a community of God's love has ripened and expanded, thanks to life in this community. I know more clearly now how essential community is for our spiritual growth and maturity, that we can feel very holy and "spiritual" as long as we hold ourselves apart from community, but that is full of illusions and delusions. It is in community that the jewel that is my own life comes to shine, but only with the polishing that comes from being "tumbled" together with others, learning what it really means to love, sharing together in silence and prayer, working together in mission and ministry. My true life comes into being through the sharing that goes on with what we call accountability, being willing to open one's life to others and to be held accountable for the commitments one makes to spiritual practice. This is how the Word becomes flesh in our own lives. It is the Word of the life God created us to live—compassion, justice, mercy, forgiveness, servanthood, humility, joy, gratitude.

The crucial thing, I believe, about spiritual or faith communities these days is that they can be places in which persons, young and old, can come back to their true selves. They are centers of recovery of our true nature, our true lives as human beings. They can be gardens in which we grow in the Word of God and the Word grows in us, matures, and flourishes in us. That is what this community is, and as long as we remain a community centered on the Word of God's love dwelling richly in and among us, it is what we will continue to be. We are, and are called to be, a community in which we are all recovering from the lies that have been told us about who we are, by society, family, sometimes religion, and learning to embody the goodness, the truth, the love which is the dynamic, empowering Word of God's love. John's gospel calls it being born again, or born anew, or born from above. It is rebirth in the sense of coming home to our true, God-created selves.

In Jesus, God's life-giving Word became REAL. That is another way to put it. The Bible is not God's Word. It points us to that living Word, or can do so when we read and use it rightly. God's Word is the dynamic energy and power of God's love manifesting in our hearts and minds, our words and actions, our work and our rest, our ways of relating to others and to ourselves. The slow dropping away of fear, anger, hatred of others and self, of preoccupation with ourselves and the arising of the freedom to love with abandon and with joy. The dropping away of the scales over our eyes so that we see what is good and true, not what is distorted by ignorance and fear, by self-protectionism and attachment to so many things that have no real value. This is all a part of our rebirth, of the Word becoming our flesh, our life, the way we live and move and have our being. And, as I have said many times before, it is not about becoming religious. It is not about becoming an adherent of a religion, and then it's defender, to the point of violence. We have more than enough of that. It is about becoming true human beings. It is about coming into our true humanity. As Jesus put it on more than one occasion, it is about becoming like little children to whom God's kingdom, God's way of life, already belongs, the little children we still are, deep inside.

So, today I give thanks for God's Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus. That is where I find the way to the Word becoming flesh in my own life. It is my own on-going rebirth. I may be retiring from my work as a minister, but there is no retiring from the work of my own spiritual journey. This is what the inward and outward journeys of prayer and service are about. I have been on that journey all my life. But these past thirteen years have blessed me with being in a community in which the Word dwells richly and in which it has gained more ground in my life. That is why, when I leave here, I am not leaving what we are essentially about. The "infleshing" of God's Word in my life continues, until that time when there is no longer God's Word and "I", but all is one. It is the journey we are on together, and in which we are forever deeply joined.