

A WORD MADE FLESH IS SELDOM AND TREMBLINGLY PARTOOK

JOHN 1:1-14

JANUARY 3, 2020

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

Our text today comes from John's Gospel. Chapter 1, verses 1-14.

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 in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 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 him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but 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.

Did you know that the elongated reflection of the moon on a body of water – that oft painted streak of white across a black ocean – is called a “moonglade”?

Or, in the 19th Century, if your Londonshire neighbor complained that you were “born a bit tired” they were suggesting you were habitually lazy, incapable of working more than a few hours a day?

Better yet, that if you hear someone describe their physical state as “frobly-mobly,” they mean to communicate, using a dialectical English word from the 17th Century, that they feel neither well nor unwell – not yet mubble-fubbles (in low spirits, of course) or fechie-leghie (insipid, lethargic). They, like so many of us, are frobly-mobly, just okay.

If you know me you know I like to talk. I love to chatter about football and historical oddities and esoteric facts. But it's not all in the talking: I like *words*. I like the sound of them, playing with pronunciations and puns, doublespeak and alliteration. Consonants hard and echoing, soft lulling vowels. I like the idea of meaning encapsulated in arrangements of letters. Words are a thing of great pleasure.

Well, they can be. I wonder these days if the joy of language, the beloved philology, to use Emily Dickinson's phrase, has become rather a nuisance. We consume language like a buffet: grabbing what we want, making whatever meaning we might wish from it, and grazing over the more challenging ideas. We hear what we want to hear and say what best fits our narrative; we marshal words and ignore them.

Words, words, words. Every time I clear my inbox, 67 new emails arrive on cue. I text constantly, probably enough to make an 11 year old blush, wordy advertisements promising all sorts of joy and happiness and extended life and younger looking skin follow me across the internet, facts and alternative facts overwhelm my newsfeed, and each new day brings competing stories and finely spun narratives.

I love words but I didn't need any of 2020's offerings: doomscrolling, qanon, quarantinis, superspreaders, and Karens. Seems today that words may be ubiquitous but meaning is scarce.

Strange then, in a world full of words, that we hear about God The Word. You'd think another noun would be better fit to break through the noise. We can ignore words. But The Action? The Glory? The Being? In the beginning was the Power has a nice ring to it – perhaps that's what we need to ring in the new year. Or better yet something you might see on Wrestlemania...

Consider: In the beginning was the Macho Man, and the Macho Man was with God, and the Macho Man was God.

I imagine that would get your attention! Set Covid on its heels! The Macho Man can power through all of our traumas! But no, amidst all our talking, our incessant words, amidst the hum meant to distract and dull, we are gifted in this season of newness The Word.

The Word by which all other words measure themselves. Not the Incredible. Not the Great. *The Word* back before the universe, back before *in the beginning*.

Indeed, at his beginning the fourth evangelist takes us all the way back before beginnings. Back when there was no time, no space, back when there was there was only Word in communion with the Father by the power of the Spirit. The Word who was with God, the Word who was God. Before we hear anything else about little baby Jesus we have to go back to the deepest reaches—beyond our comprehension, outside of everything we know and recognize, outside anything our words can describe. The evangelist anchors his good news in the promise of *The Word*.

Now in Hebrew the idea of “word” has a nice playfulness about it. A word is not a simple thing, a collection of letters that add up to a certain meaning, but a living reality. A word does not simply refer to an object or idea, it makes meaning, it creates. So it is that when a person for the very first time says “I love you,” a new thing is generated. Saying “I love you” makes real one’s love.

When he points to The Word, our writer is, I think, picking up on = Hebrew ideas of generative speech to give greater meaning to beginnings. The Speech of God generates the reality of God in creation. God, out of sheer hospitality, sheer grace, creates for us a beginning – a new *good* thing – not because it was necessary, but because it was Good, and it was high time that the Word speak.

That’s a good thing for us – even, perhaps especially now – because it means that there is no corner of creation, no outer boundary in our world which does not echo with the generosity of The Word. There is nothing through which The Word cannot speak. Nothing that *is* void of the image of God, the love of God, the peace of God.

The Word is the boundary of our existence and the stuff of our being. The Word is our breath, so constant that we forget its necessity. In The beginning and in all our beginnings is The Word. And y’all, at this and every new beginning, that is good news indeed.

Oh I can hear you now: “Here Leigh goes again, talking, talking, talking, spinning a nice tale full of words words words ‘told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’”

A Word sounds nice, but to we who are in the thick of it, in the flesh and blood world, to we who read the newspapers, see the ambulances, sit anxiously in the hospital waiting room, a word seems inconsequential. What can a word do ...

after a catastrophic year,
when we long for hope,
when it seems too dark for any light to penetrate...

Yet again, a Macho Man might've been the better choice.

So we keep reading. Because the story is not simply about the disembodied Word, the story is centered in flesh-and-blood reality. This second Sunday after Christmas we have to do not only with Word, but with a far-away manger where a poor mother tends to her new born child.

The impossible, contradictory, scandalous, and beautiful affirmation of Christmas is that The Word, the generating principal of all life, the bounteous gift of shared love, the light which cannot be quenched, has become flesh. Dirty and fragile, weak and precious. The Word become Flesh living among us.

Not on a throne, not riding valiantly into battle, not in the legislator's seat. In a back alley manger in a podunk village lies The Word, screaming at the top of his lungs, hungry for milk and his mother. The Word of God through whom every single thing came into being, serenaded by a drummer boy (if you can call a drum solo being "serenaded"), brought impractical gifts by the well-meaning magi, and hunted by a jealous ruler.

The Word became flesh! In that sentence, in those words, all human hope is contained. The Word – the power, the glory! – became flesh so that our endless chatter might become generative, so that our livening might become abundant life, so that our darkened fear might be transformed to brilliant light. So that the world might once again be *very good*.

That "The Word became flesh" is a regime-threatening claim *even today*. It is not a disinterested promise. It challenges banal speech and foolish spin. It is *the Truth*. To say "the Word became flesh" is to affirm everyday existence, to affirm the worth of our flesh-and-blood siblings throughout creation, to affirm human dignity, to affirm one another. To say "the Word became flesh" means that God so loved creation that he came to this far country, not to rescue us from it but to reconcile us with it, and transform us into a new way of living, a way that echos the Goods of Genesis. To say

“the Word became flesh” is to affirm the light and to seek it out, to shine it and cast out all the world’s darkness.

Why else in the Gospel’s prologue, this triumph of Biblical literature, would the fourth evangelist include the strange interlude about John, the one who “came as a witness to testify to the light”? By pointing to the Baptist, the evangelist points to us. Will we, like John, be witnesses to this Word, the lowly Word whose very presence is light and life? Will our words be *generative*, upbuilding the Kingdom, affirming human dignity, honoring the good creation of which we are Stewards?

The work of the Baptist is the work of Christmas. Not just to see this child, to gaze on his lowly cradle, but to point to him amidst all the world’s darkness, to speak his peace and do his work: finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry, releasing the prisoner, reconciling peoples, and bringing peace.

We, like John the Baptist, find ourselves holding the light of the Word, the beginning of beginnings, flickering and fragile though it – and we – may be. No darkness is too dark, no terror too real to quench the light. It shines. And the darkness has not, cannot, will not grasp it.

You know maybe the Macho Man is too much. In our world we don’t need more power, we don’t need more glory, we need meaning, we need the Word.

If we are lucky at the bottom of all of our talking talking talking, at the bottom of our words words words we will stumble upon the Word, fragile in a manger, fragile on a cross. He will call us to account, not because we are great sinners, but because at the beginning and all of our beginnings we were created very good and by the power of the Word that Good that image remains in each of us, a possibility for transformation, for light, for good. By taking hold of the light, the light which turns us outward–toward podunk Bethlehem, back-alley Greenville, toward the poor and the outcasts, the despised, the untouchables of our world—we can take hold of The Word which created, sustains, and transforms all of our beginnings.

Happy New Year. Grab the light. Get to work.

–*The Reverend Leigh Stuckey*