

John 1:1-5, 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 ⁴in 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.

...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.

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The Meaning of Incarnation

What is “the incarnation”? What is this this thing John speaks of when he says “the Word became *flesh* and lived among us”?

Incarnation means the “enfleshment” of God in a human. It comes from “carne,” meaning flesh or meat, as in carnivorous. It’s the idea of God taking on human flesh.

What does incarnation mean for us, on this Christmas morning?

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When my children were younger, I had the privilege of teaching the Godly Play curriculum in Sunday School. Some of you may know it.

Each Sunday a teacher gathers the children in a circle on the floor, and sitting there with them, tells a story from the Bible. We use objects, such as a box filled with sand to represent the desert, where so many of the Bible stories take place – in the vast and lonely desert. There are small wooden figures to represent the characters. And the stories use carefully scripted words and gestures that teachers are asked to follow, because the phrases and gestures appear as refrains from lesson to lesson.

One refrain that I loved is told about Abraham and later about Moses. I would take up a small wooden figure, just the size of one of my fingers. We knew it was a human because it had arms and legs, but the figure had no features, so it could be any character, and any of us – old or young, women or men.

I would slowly walk the figure out into the desert and say these words: One day, when Abram had walked out to the edge of the desert, God grew so close to Abram, and Abram grew so close to God, that Abram *knew* what God wanted him to do. I would gently cup first my left hand, and then my right hand, around the little figure, as God grew so close to Abram, and then Abram grew so close to God.

I loved those gestures, and the thought of the two parts of what was taking place: both the small human growing so close to God, *and* God coming to be so close to the small human, that *both* understood the other. They knew each other *enough* that Abram knew how to act as God wanted. And knowing, Abram left all he knew -- family and tribe, home and security -- and was willing to risk setting off across that vast desert for the promised land to which God promised to lead him.

Maybe for us people of church – at least for those of us who show up, even early in the morning on Christmas Day - this description of Abram, and later of Moses, conveys a deep yearning we all have: to grow close enough to the Holy, and to have the Holy grow close enough to us, that we know each other. It's why we're seekers, wanting a deeper understanding of the profound presence in the universe, known by many names – God, Love, the Ground of our Being. We also seek a deeper sense of ourselves and others, a way for us to live as humans, here on this planet, in personal and powerful connection to each other and some astounding power beyond us.

For me, the little gesture from the Godly Play curriculum - where “God grew so close to Abram and Abram grew so close to God, that Abram knew what God wanted him to do” – that gesture of gently cupped hands surrounding the human, has become my best understanding of the incarnation of which John speaks in the text read today.

Stephanie Paulsell, a professor at Harvard Divinity School, writes in her beautiful book about Christian honoring of bodies, that somehow God was so fully present within a particular human body -- that of Jesus -- that God came within it and fully filled up it up.

Some Christians would say that Jesus is unique in this relation with God: as the Nicene Creed states, Jesus is “the only begotten son of God.” John himself writes that Jesus and God were always one, from the beginning of time, so that Jesus, from the instant of his conception was divine. It was not something into which he grew, over time, as his relationship with the Holy grew. As one of my old ministers felt, Jesus was different from all the rest of us; “Jesus always played with a different deck” of cards than we do, he'd say: Jesus had extra aces.

But there is another view of the incarnation. Once we grasp that God can dwell within a *body* – within Mary's, and then within that of a boy and a man Jesus-- then God can be within my body, too. And yours.

That's why some Christians have no problem saying Jesus was the Son of God, so long as we say that *all of us* are or can be Sons and Daughters of God: that there is the spark of the divine within each of us. As we read last night during Lessons and Carols, from the book of Genesis, humans were made “in the image of God,” so each has the potential to grow as close to God as Jesus did.

Abram and Moses grew so close to God, they knew what God wanted them to do. Jesus also came so close to God, that Christians would say they understand God most

when they look to Jesus, and how he lived. God was so imbued in Jesus' life, that some have said God and Jesus became one, indistinguishable.

For the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is this act – the incarnation, God within a human body - that is celebrated as the *most important* day of the year, even greater than Easter. For them, the single most important thing that saves us humans is not so much Jesus rising from the dead at Easter, the hope of our resurrection after death, but rather the hope of the Christmas message: hope grown of a God who is willing to live within us paltry humans. Incarnation: the Holy indwelling in *us*.

The service of communion we will share today also can be understood in so many ways across a spectrum. Some would say we are re-enacting a meal where Jesus asked followers to remember him. Others would say communion is the actual in-taking of the body and blood of Christ; this is the position of the most sacramental churches.

Wherever you fall on this spectrum, it's there again, isn't it: some taking within ourselves of something holy, right into our bodies, during communion.

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But couldn't God within us make us squeamish?

Theresa of Avila imagined an "interior glass castle" within herself, as she went deeper and deeper into relationship with God. For me, it's more like the home a storybook badger or mole might have. God enters a series of tunnels within me, needing to push past cobwebs to get to a comfortable chair in the semi-darkness of my cluttered living room.

I'm more embarrassed than overjoyed to see God on the threshold. I blush with awareness of the dust bunnies scuttling around the floor, and my haphazard stacks of books and papers - my "filing by piling." I grow nervous, feeling that this indwelling of God may be more like God's invasion, that in days ahead I might hear God's footsteps overhead, rummaging in my messy attic, discovering things I don't even remember stashing there: out of sight, out of mind.... When I come home from the grocery store, will my furniture be rearranged?

God coming into my very own heart and making a home there? Sitting with me in my untidy life and wanting to *change* things...?

I do feel excitement, at the thought of God and I growing closer, but I'm squeamish, too. Squeamish, or downright panicked, ready to cut and run, ready to defend myself from outside invasion....

Until.....Until sometime, I finally notice, I finally glimpse, I somehow see, however dimly, perhaps through the music of a Christmas Eve service, or the candlelight surrounding me there, that God isn't fixated on those mortifying dust bunnies that worry me so.

God's interest is in *me*: in me being fully alive, fully myself. Not someone else I never could be, but my best self, the one God has dreamt of for me, for all of my life. As John says later in this gospel, Jesus declares: "I came that they might have life, and have it *abundantly*."

On Christmas morning, this is the gift we receive: the notion that God wants to abide in us, and have us abide in God. To be as close to each other as possible. So that when I grow so close to God, and God grows so close to me, I know what God wants me to do, who God has made *me* to be...Who God has made *you* to be. How together, with God, we can bring God's kingdom of justice and peace and healing here to earth.

And those dark, mole-like tunnels within? Even there, the light can shine. And then throughout the world.

For a Light shines in the Darkness, and the Darkness has *never* overcome it.
Alleluia!

Amen.