

A Sermon on John 1:1-18
Christmas 2 B
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“Peace Not Walls” is a special ELCA campaign calling for efforts toward a viable, contiguous Palestinian state; a secure Israeli state at peace with its Arab neighbors; and a shared Jerusalem with equal access and rights for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This week 39 ELCA bishops, 5 Canadian bishops, 27 spouses and 14 ELCA churchwide staff are expected to make a visit to Jordan and Jerusalem. The visit is intended to show support for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and Holy Land (ELCJHL), led by its bishop, the Rev. Munib A. Younan, and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). The bishops also want to learn more about the complexities in the region, and to promote just and peaceful solutions to the conflict.

“This is a tragic yet opportune time for North American Lutherans to visit their partners in Palestine,” said Younan, also an LWF vice president, in a news release. “They will have a unique opportunity to witness the challenges of living in this disputed land.” Though justice and peace may at times struggle against each other, our call for peace should be heard. I urge you to learn more about all of these issues on the www.elca.org website.

Let us pray

Emmanuel among us, we find ourselves in a “tragic yet opportune time.” Fighting has broken out yet again in the Gaza Strip of Palestine.. We pray that decades and centuries of division and hate can somehow be bridged, that people of many religions and ethnic backgrounds can find ways to put down weapons and talk. Today we pray for peace and justice in all lands. We also pray that lasting, just, and peaceful solutions be found and implemented for Israel and Palestinians. We ask your safety for our bishops and pray that their learnings and experience in these violent days might impact this church and your world in ways that will be according to your will. Amen.

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“In the beginning.” Another book of the Bible starts in exactly that way, doesn’t it. That other book, Genesis, writes of the beginning of the cosmos. This book, John, writes of the beginning of a people, a whole new race of humanity.¹ This is the beginning of the people who receive the gift of God. This is the beginning of the “children of God.” So, it turns out that the opening verses of John are every bit as much about us as about God. The work of God, which is witnessed to here at Christmas, makes plain what a child of God is.

¹ “This is to be a story certainly not of John, not of ‘Jesus Christ’ only (v.17), but of a new race of humanity.” I am very much indebted to Gerard Sloyan for this insight into John 1:1-18. *John* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), p. 14.

Just as we are fiddling with our new gifts in the pews, you and I may wonder if we have asked for too much. Long ago we did plead that God would rend the heavens open and come down. But we didn't figure he would really do it. We didn't figure that he would, as John puts it, become flesh *bound*.² We always thought he would swoop down and take us away with him to a finer better place. We didn't figure that he would in some irrevocable way move in with us. No one figured on a disruption like that.

My mother was the youngest of six. Her oldest sister was Tilda. Tilda had several children, and was very accomplished at raising of same. I need to say right off the top that I didn't much like Tilda.

About once a year my mother, just like John the Baptizer, would announce that Tilda was coming. Inwardly, I would groan. Tilda was large, she was used to being in charge, and she didn't take any guff from anyone, especially not from a kid like me. And when Tilda had moved into our small house, there was no getting away from her. She had this way of filling up the whole house. Though they never said it, my sense was that my parents felt somewhat the same as I did. Tilda re-did all my mother's housekeeping. She did the dishes in a different way. She insisted on the house – and me -- to run now on her standards. And she had this way of barking orders in a manner I could tell annoyed my father. I tried ignoring her as much as it was possible.

To my mind Tilda always stayed too long. In my foggy memory when other relatives came for a weekend, it seemed Tilda stayed for two weeks. In one moment of exasperation and regrettable smartmouth I asked over the dinner table just how long Tilda was going to stay with us *this* time. That question cost me dearly. With Tilda on the scene everything changed. I longed for my old life, my old family, our old house back.

The population here is mixed. You would think that this grace, this visitor, this word become flesh would be welcomed. But we know that isn't how it happened. We know it doesn't happen that way in us. "And the word became flesh and lived among us. . . he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." That God would "pitch his tent" among us is to many a little disturbing. It's like being offered something wonderful and life changing and turning it down because you really wanted the old life back.

So now an "outrageous novelty"³ has moved in with us. The word became flesh, and now grace and truth are everywhere to be found. There are no signs of his leaving. "[I]s it really good news that God comes in *our flesh*? In all of its messiness? In our imperfections? In our limitations? . . . [E]ntry into this world is hardly what we would expect of God's only child."⁴ It

² Of the anti-gnostic intentions of John, Sloyan writes, "The earth-bound human character of John and Jesus in the Gospel prologue had no appeal for them [gnostics]." His view is that Gnostic recast John's rhetoric and not the other way around as many claim. Sloyan, p. 15.

³ W. H. Auden, *For The Time Being*.

⁴ Ann Milliken Pederson, "Christmas and the Reality of the Incarnation: *Finitum capax infiniti*, *Word and World*, Volume 27, Number 4 (Fall, 2007), 382.

seems an alien faith. When can we get our old life back? That the Word came into the world and the world “received him not” is one of our most enduring spiritual mysteries.

The word has moved in with us. He has “pitched his tent” among us. Not it’s all grace and truth. Now there is no getting away from him. Now it’s grace upon grace, which he “lavished upon us.”⁵ No matter which way we turn, there we run into this word made flesh. We cannot run to sickness, loneliness, desperation, hatred and divisions, war, terror or even death. No matter where we run, there this word made flesh is there ahead of us. He is flesh *bound* with us.

In the end the story of Christmas in the gospel of John reveals as much about you and me as it does about God. As a Ann Milliken Pederson writes, the Christmas John narrates,

[h]as nothing to do with the drama of the perfect family or the chastity of reproduction. Instead, the Christmas story is a holy narrative about the collective pain of our inescapable mortality, our shared sufferings and joys, and finally about the persistent hope offered through a human being who full embraces the human condition. That is the good news.⁶

The larger mystery is that some did receive him. Some received this gift. And in so doing it comes into view who we were all along. We are “the children of God.” Luther famously wrote, “We should be human and not God.”⁷ This gift of word made flesh first shows us what human is. In short, we are created, “issued” from God, dependent on the gifts of God’s grace. Who are we? We are the receivers of God’s gift. This is a beginning of a whole new race of humanity.⁸

The mystery of resistance to this gift will persist. But, as these verses from John disclose so clearly, God insists on giving the gift anyway. God is determined; the grace God insists on giving. Like an uninvited relative, he has moved in and intends to stay. Only this one who has moved in is not here to order us around. He is sheer grace instead. God will “gather up all things in him.”⁹ And all the while we receive grace upon grace upon grace upon grace. And *that* is who a child of God is. Amen.

⁵ Ephesians 1:8.

⁶ Pederson, p. 382.

⁷ Martin Luther, Letter to Spalatin (June 30, 1530) *Luther’s Works*, p. 337.

⁸ “In faith the human person relies totally upon the act of God, or rather, upon God’s creative word-act. And it is to God’s creative word that the human person owes his- or herself. . . . Faith makes a person into a person precisely because faith (at first) does nothing other than let God work.” Eberhard Jüngel, “On Becoming Truly Human,” *Theological Essays II*, ed. by J. W. Webster (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995), p. 231.

⁹ Ephesians 1:10.