

12/25/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Merry Christmas, everyone!

We took the liberty of consolidating our Christmas Day service and our Sunday morning service into just one. Hopefully that is OK with everyone. Otherwise you would have had to come early in order to get two separate services in.

We are a slimmer crowd than last night, but it is good to be gathered together to celebrate the birth of Christ. We hope that you all are able to celebrate this day with people that are dear to you.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Join me in the Call to Worship that is printed in your bulletins, and adapted from the Soil and the Seed Project resource.

Leader: God with Us, Immanuel, there in the beginning

All: *You took on flesh and lived among us*

Leader: Christ, your coming was written in the stars

All: *You reveal yourself to us*

Leader: Your light shines in the darkness

All: *Open our hearts and reveal your glory*

Leader: Comfort the mourning and protect the vulnerable, we pray

All: *God, we put our trust in you*

INVOCATION

Immanuel,

Wisdom and Word,

You who were the agent of God's creation,

We put our trust in You, with the limited understanding that we have. Let us not celebrate only out of custom, and only out of a feel-good vibe, but let us open ourselves anew to this old story of your Word becoming flesh.

Let us open ourselves not simply to a tradition or nice idea, but to your presence in our midst, in the stuff of our lives. Let us hear the good news of great joy and take it to heart.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Creator God of all love and all that is... it would be easy for us to shrink and tremble as we try to grasp who you are and what it means that you came to us as one of us. But then we remember that we don't have to shrink or tremble – because you came to us as love. And we praise you

and thank you again for the birth of the baby Jesus. Yes, that Holy gift whose presence is among us in our lives, in the lives of those around us and in this – your world, God, wondrous and frightening as it is. You are here, with us.

Even as we celebrate the birth of that divine and human child those hundreds of years ago and thousands of miles away from here, we feel the grief of the cycle of life and the loss of ones dear to us. We pray for the Bergen family, for Jenny and Greg and their children and for extended family members and the many friends who are missing Dan. We pray also for the family and friends of Milt – for Marvin and Rosalie and Eulalia, for Travis and Carol, Gary and Marlo and all their families and the many others who know and love Milt. We pray also for David Esau and his family as they continue to care for their mother, Zola.

Loving God, we pray for your grace and mercy for others whose grief is not as fresh but is every bit as real as the absence of loved ones is felt so keenly in this holiday season. May your Spirit of comfort be felt through memories and the love of family and friends.

We pray, God, for those who are travelling during these busy holidays. Grant travel mercies and blessings at these times of gathering when people can reconnect with one another. Be especially with Caleb and Beth and the boys as they travel today and in the days to come; return them to us safe and rejuvenated.

We know that you hear the cries of your people wherever they are suffering, God. Be with those whose lives will be forever altered because of war, fear, some craving power over others. Be with the Ukrainians, the Kurds, the Yughurs, the Palestinians, the Yemenis, and so many others suffering at the hands of other people groups. Be with those who have fled their homes seeking safety and peace for themselves and their families. You are the God of shalom – who longs for all your creatures to have enough, to be safe, to care for the earth and one another.

Gracious God, we offer prayers of celebration and thanksgiving as we have come together and given generously of our time and energy, our creativity and our financial resources to this church, this community and more broadly to the work of your kingdom. As the words say in the song *You Are Salt for the Earth*, “We are a blessed and a pilgrim people, bound for the kingdom of God! Love our journey and love our homeland; LOVE is the kingdom of God!”

Thank you for this Christmas morning! For this opportunity to gather, to celebrate and worship, to sing, to pray and hear again the words of scripture that guide and inspire us. And all God’s people said... “Amen.”

OFFERING PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God, as we dedicate these financial offerings to you, we remember that love cannot remain by itself – it has no meaning. Love has to be put into action, and that action is giving and serving. Whatever our abilities, whatever our resources, it is not how much we do or give, but how much love we put into the doing and the giving; a lifelong sharing of love with others. Amen.

LOVE TOOK ON FLESH – PASTOR CALEB YODER

John 1:1-14

We all have memories and associations of Christmas.

When I was growing up, we opened our stockings on Christmas Eve. Often, we would stay up late watching a Christmas movie. A few years, my sisters and I slept in sleeping bags in the living room.

Most years we had a meal involving cheesy potato soup. When I was younger, we'd gather with the Yoder's on Christmas Day and have a giant lunch around a big table. Now, I'm pretty sure the way my family did it was the correct way, spelled out in scripture. It's what Jesus wanted for his birthday.

Now, it is quite appropriate to have a time of the year to gather with family and friends, and celebrate with familiar traditions. It's fair to ask what it all has to do with Jesus.

The word Christmas comes from "Christ-mass," the traditional worship service on Christmas Day that traditionally is part of the liturgical church year. How that day got to be December 25 is another story we don't need to get into. There's a 1 in 365 chance we got the right date.

At Christmas, we think of a romanticized version of shepherds, wisemen, and numerous animals all gathering at a very picturesque stable. It's true that Luke's account of the birth implies livestock, as Jesus was laid in a feeding trough, as a guest or lodging space is unavailable.

Archeology has revealed that animals were customarily kept in the lower floor of houses at night. Think of the Schroeder barn which had living quarters for the family, or the structures that Mennonites built in Prussia with living quarters and barn under one roof. Mary, Joseph, and the infant apparently had to share space with the animals.

Mary had to labor and give birth in a space that wouldn't have been considered ideal even by the standards of the day. And this was long before sanitation or modern medicine. Childbirth was risky, and infancy was risky. If we could have been there, the actual embodied, in-the-flesh reality was not pretty or picturesque.

John's Gospel skips any details of Jesus' birth, and instead goes further back in time... to the beginning of time. When God created the universe, the Word was there with God, creating with God. John's prologue gives a midrash or interpretation of the Genesis account of creation, in which God's spoken word carves all that is out of a previously light-less void.

John's words are beautiful poetry.

The first lines give a stair-stepping pattern in which the subject at the end of each line begins the next line.

In the beginning was the *Word*. This *Word* was with *God*. *God* is what the *Word* was (The word order is flexible in the original allowing for the first word to be *God*). The *Word* was in the beginning with *God*.

The next part depends a little on how the lines are punctuated. But it likely is:

All things came into being through the ***Word***. Apart from the ***Word***, nothing ***came into being***. What ***came into being*** in the *Word* was ***life***. The ***life*** was the *light* of all people. The *light* shines in the *darkness*. The *darkness* has not overtaken or extinguished the *light*.

We move through the themes of the divine *Word*, creation, life, and light.

The Greek word for *Word* is *Logos*. Scholars point to a number of possible influences to the idea of this preexistent *Logos* or *Word*.

For one, some Greek philosophers spoke of the *Logos* as the ordering principle of the universe. Jewish intellectuals like Philo integrated these ideas into Judaism. There is also plenty of background within Judaism. There was a long tradition going back to the book of Proverbs of talking about divine Wisdom as the life-giving agent of creation. In Jesus' day, the native language was Aramaic, and Aramaic versions of the Old Testament often substituted the word "Word" for the divine name.

So there's nothing in the first verses that is totally original or a departure from usual ways of talking about *God* in Judaism. But when we get to verse 14, the story gets a new twist.

The *Word* became flesh.

"Flesh"? We call this the "incarnation." Incarnation is a churchy, abstract sounding word. It really means "enfleshment" or "taking on flesh," which somehow sounds a little more scandalous.

Think *carni-vore*; in-*carn*-ation.

When I was a boy, I was pretty scrawny and skinny (I know, you'd never guess that now). One time when we were up at my grandparent's place in Michigan, a very large fellow at their church looked at me and said, "*You need to get some more meat on those bones!*"

I didn't appreciate that comment very much. I guess he was just saying I needed to get more incarnate.

What does it mean to say that the *Word* got some meat on its bones?

Incarnation is the principle that *God* is pleased to dwell in matter.

The Christian story proclaims Jesus as the quintessential example of *God's* incarnation. This was a special moment in time, but not the one and only time.

In fact, incarnation has always been true. *God* takes on flesh in creation. *God* spoke the words of human language in the giving of the Law and the messages of the Prophets.

God calls all who witness to the Good News of Jesus to not just speak words, but to let the Good News become incarnate in our actions.

Madeleine L'Engle, the well-known author of the *Wrinkle in Time* books, said this of incarnation:

"It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine. Christ... the Maker of the universe or perhaps many universes, willingly and lovingly leaving all that power and coming to this poor, sin-filled planet to live with us for a few years to show us what we ought to be and could be. Christ came to us as Jesus of Nazareth, wholly human and wholly divine, to show us what it means to be made in God's image."

"The Word became flesh and *lived* among us." Other translations say "made his dwelling or home among us." The word *lived* is important, because in both Greek and Hebrew it is the same root as the word for "tent" or "tabernacle."

The Gospel writer connects the life of Jesus to the Tabernacle of old, which served as the place to meet God when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. You might say that in Jesus, God set up camp among us. This is God not far off, or who is known only by decree, but who is known in the life and person and compassion of Jesus.

The teaching that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in the human being has always felt a bit scandalous. It has always been hard to wrap our brains around "true man and yet very God."

The earliest Christians were tempted by Docetism, which was the idea that Jesus only *appeared* to be human. Humanity just seemed unworthy of the Son of God.

To be honest, bodies can be kind of gross. There are things that we could say about Jesus' body that would be true in general of human bodies, or specifically male bodies.

But it would feel sacrilegious and inappropriate to say it explicitly from the pulpit on Christmas Day. To make matters worse, people in the first century, Jesus included, did not take daily showers or use deodorant. OK, see? I shouldn't go further.

Our temptation furthermore is to not let Jesus grow up, unless it is as a gentle bearded white man with white children on his lap. We pay less attention to his challenging teaching, or think too much about what it was that he did and said that got him killed on a Roman cross.

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All our bodies do and will fail us. My own managing of injuries or issues that impact running has given me a greater appreciation for the gift and miracle that a body is. Anyone with in-depth understanding of biology comes away fascinated, if not a sense of sacred awe.

People of faith don't have the full explanation of how God created, but we see the marvelous intricacy of creation and our bodies. We know each moment in life is a gift not to be taken for granted. We know that being embodied creatures has its pleasures as well as great limitations.

We live in a time in which our culture often detaches us or insulates us from the reality of being embodied creatures in a beautiful and terrifying physical world.

We live behind screens. Much of our food comes from mechanized agriculture and we buy it in supermarkets. We live in climate-controlled homes, and can even speed across the land at 75 miles per hour in climate-controlled boxes on wheels.

We've pretty much exterminated our own natural predators, and in fact are the world's biggest predator.

When we wish to feel more connected with the natural world, we do so as a hobby, not a necessity – hobbies like hiking, fishing, hunting, or camping; often with modern gear that let us control our desired level of risk or discomfort.

Perhaps in the country we are a little more in touch with the natural world than folks in the city, but not in the same way that our great-grandparents were, or that other cultures have been.

And when I say in touch with the natural world, I don't mean serene meditation in a perfect sunny breeze, as much as a healthy fear of the untamable earth – a nature that is both source of life and at any given moment source of death.

Instead, we live with the illusion of having tamed the world. I'm not saying this is all wrong. In most respects, we can't go back, and wouldn't want to go back. There would be a lot of starving people if we went back to plowing with oxen or winnowing grain.

But maybe it is good to keep this awareness. We must remember who we are and where we came from and to where we are going – the dust of the earth.

In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the lion Aslan, who represents Jesus is described as not "tame." A God present in the incarnation is not tame either.

APPLICATION

How then do we respond to the God incarnate in Jesus, and to God incarnate in our present reality?

We must learn to recognize God's love within our sometimes marvelous and sometimes painful embodied life in the world. We must learn to recognize God in the ordinary, in the stuff of daily life.

We can notice God's artwork in the glistening snow or hoar frost. We can feel the danger of God's Spirit in the biting arctic wind that stings the skin. We must discipline ourselves to see God's love present in the people around us, flawed as they are.

Certainly, reality may at times seem more like God's wrath than God's love. We may need to live with a paradox to believe that God's love is incarnate in our reality.

We have to alter our posture to the reality of our lives, including what we want to call "bad."

God's love is there. It's not that God causes grief or "bad things," but that even these things are taken into God's love. God is present in the light spaces and the dark spaces. The darkness never overtakes God's love.

Not all of us find it easy to feel God's presence, and none of us will all the time. Some people try to pray for years and feel nothing.

I suggest we don't always need to *feel* God, if we are willing to open ourselves to the thought of God's presence on the testimony of this ancient passage – the Word became flesh and set up camp in the stuff of our lives.

This Jesus who was the presence of God among people was not exempt from suffering, even the suffering of going to the cross.

People have found innumerable meanings to the cross. The meaning I gravitate toward is that the cross is God's solidarity with us. God's love is upon the one who dies, and not even death overtakes or separates us from the love of Christ. No death has the last word. The pattern of God's love is always resurrection.

Hopefully this is an encouragement to us, whether we are filled with Christmas cheer or struggling with the limits and pain of embodied existence – pain of body, pain of soul, or the pain of separation from people we have loved and who loved us, or even the pain of love that was broken or never felt.

A central meaning of the story of Jesus is that divine love is real and is never far, no matter where we are. We simply must be open to trusting that. This is the faith that the prologue in John is calling us to.

The line from the third verse of "O Holy Night" reads:

*"The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our friend
He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger"*

God's love is present in the stuff of our lives.

Love took on flesh.

BENEDICTION

In the fullness of time, Christ has come into the world and into our lives. May you go out into this world of terror and beauty with the assurance that the love of Christ is with you.