

"...and the Word Became Flesh"

John 1:10-18

SMPC

January 3, 2021

The author Anne Lamott has some interesting insight about the Christian journey and our walk with God. I happen to follow her musings on Twitter as well. Those tweets and her books are very down to earth, pretty funny, but with some good insights on life.

In one of her earlier books she was a single mom, raising a boy named Sam. She wrote that she really loved Sam, but the problem was that Sam as a 4 year-old did not come with any operating instructions.

So she decided to title her book "Operating Instructions" and we read about human relationships and how we find God in unexpected places. Later she updated this work when she had grandchildren and called that book "Some Assembly Required"

Anne tells the story of a time when Sam was only 2 and had accidentally locked himself in the bedroom. She was remaining calm and trying to communicate how he could unlock the door, and Sam just couldn't get it.

He became worried, then scared, and then started to cry. His mother finally called 911 and asked that someone come and unlock the door and they did.

In the moments while they were waiting for help to arrive, Sam became more and more upset. All Anne could do was get down on the floor and she pushed her fingers under the door. All that would fit were two fingers. But that was enough. Sam grabbed onto those two fingers and held on to her and she held on to him.

And the word became flesh and lived among us.

The first chapter of John describes in eloquent terms the concept of the Incarnation. It is possibly the central mystery of the Christian faith. When we talk about God as a mystery, this is at the heart of it.

As human beings in a sense we have locked ourselves in a room and the theological mystery is that in a way, God comes right to that door where we are locked and there is no way we can humanly solve this puzzle.

While we are wondering how God can unlock the door, God reaches out two fingers and touches us.

The Incarnation is what we affirm on Christmas and Epiphany, but it has been challenging to scholars for 2000 years. So I would like to consider three questions during this season of Christmas as we celebrate the Christ child in the world.

QUESTION 1

Who is this Christ child?

It's not as simple a question as you might imagine. People have wrestled with this question for generations, even Jesus asks his followers, who do you say that I AM?

A PASTOR NAMED DIANE SHIELDS answered that question by telling. story.

It seems that her church in Illinois has a Christmas pageant every year, and her role in the pageant is to be the angel who delivers the baby Jesus to the manger scene.

They always use a newborn baby, and she says it is the highlight of her year to walk down the center aisle of the church with the baby.

As she slowly walks down, all eyes are fixed on the baby - she says children, teens, mothers, fathers, all looking at the baby. College professors and CEO's are all on their tiptoes to see the baby. As if they are asking "Who is it?"

She says, it is like they are asking, Who is this baby, Who is Jesus? Is Jesus just a human baby, is Jesus really God with us?

That is our question. Who is Jesus?

Before we answer that, realize it took the church around 500 years to come up with the words to describe who Jesus is.

There were some who felt he could only be human, another felt he must be a God pretending to be human.

But in 451, a council reached a consensus and spoke as one, and said in Christ Jesus we have a union of God and human, one substance two different beings. Fully God fully human.

SO this means that all the properties of divinity are available to Jesus and all the human experience is as well, Jesus wept, he was exhausted, he was hungry. On the cross he said "I thirst" it was a real physical need, it was not a metaphor.

So when Jesus says to his followers "Who do you say that I am?" It is a complex question.

Here's one way to look at it:

At the center of the Christian faith is a God who loved us enough to become flesh. So the central aspect of our faith is not so much a doctrine, or even a set of ethical standards, though those are important.

At the center of our faith together as reformed Christians, is a person, the person of JESUS who is the messiah. The most towering figure in history, but also controversial.

Whenever I think about that, I remember that the western world is divided into BC and AD by his birth. Even people of other faiths or no faith know of Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer memorably writes that Christ is the center. The Center of the universe as well as our faith.

What do you think?

Who is Jesus? It's the question of Christmas and epiphany.

QUESTION 2

Why did God become human?

A theologian named St. Anselm asked that question almost 1,000 years ago. What he concluded was that God became human to redeem the world. God became human because God could not abandon us.

It is the sense in which Anne Lamott went to her son's door and saw the predicament and could not just leave him there. She came. To be with her child, and put her two fingers under the door in his time of need.

God came because of the human predicament, and God came to redeem us. Anselm uses a very post-modern term - he says God came to make a connection. The word became flesh. God made that connection with us.

Isn't it true that sometimes there are neighborhoods where you can live for years and not know who lives down the street, not make a connection, not even know their names? We are so fortunate to live in a neighborhood where that is not the case. But even among

family members, sometimes there is a lack of connection, or even a hostility.

But God became human so we could make things right again. It was even in that chapter 1 of John's gospel - Jesus came into his own and they received him not. But to all who received him and believed in his name he gave them power to be children of God.

Christmas and Epiphany is about a God who loves us enough to become human.

It's like the story of the popular Pope John 23rd. He was especially respected by people in Rome because he would show up in unexpected places, just like God.

You might remember that he would make a visit every Christmas day to a prison in Rome. -a different one every year.

The prisoners would be stunned to see the pontiff with all his regalia and his entourage walking through the cells, and they would say, "Father why have you come to this awful place on such a day? We are thieves and murderers, Why?"

And the pope would answer, "My children it is simple, I come to you because you could not come to me."

That is the essence of the incarnation. If God showed up in a manger, where else might God appear? God might show up in an unexpected place in your life or mine.

Once you ponder question number one, Who is Jesus, and number 2 Why?

Then you can ask question 3:

QUESTION 3

Am I willing to make God's love incarnate in the lives of other people?

God may come to us today or this week unexpectedly disguised as a problem or a nuisance or an interruption.

Henri Nouwen said that "I used to grumble and complain that my work was being interrupted until I realized that interruptions were my work."

So God may come to us this week in a Zoom call with an old friend, or a problem with a family member, or someone struggling with COVID. It could be a problem at work, or anxiety about money or how we are going to get through the winter. The question for us as followers of Christ is how are we going to make God's love flesh?

John's incredible chapter tells us that there is a greater purpose in life than us just working or doing our chores or whatever we are doing. Whether you are young or old, retired or working, whatever your gender, our purpose is to follow God's lead and make God's love flesh.

We happened to watch a PBS DOCUMENTARY about the origins of the song Silent Night during Christmas break. It has a fascinating history, over 200 years, and the story was so well done. Towards the end of program, we are taken back to the year 1914 in the trenches of WW1. It is a famous story. On Christmas Eve the guns fell silent as the two sides were dug into their trenches. In the darkness, a soldier began to see a small light across the no mans' land. And soon after the song Stille Nacht in German began to be heard all up and down the German lines.

Soon the English began joining in with their version of Silent Night. The next day on Christmas, at dawn, some courageous soldiers crept out of their trench on both sides, and exchanged Christmas greetings, and even exchanged some gifts, tobacco or bandages, or the rare

chocolates. Then they all came out. There was time to bury those who had fallen. Somewhere up the lines, a soccer game broke out.

And yes, you may be cynical to point out that the next day, the fighting resumed. But for that one brief moment, the light had come into the world. The song of Jesus' birth united even enemies.

When those soldiers had that brief moment of brotherhood? Do you know what happened? The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

It sounds like something we could even use today, doesn't it?

May it be so for us all.

Thanks be to God Amen.