

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Word Becomes Flesh

John 1:1-18

There are ways to extend the celebration of Christmas. Some are intentional and some unintentional. You can leave your tree up and the decorations displayed. You can keep singing or listening to Christmas songs. You can still munch on candy or other snacks that sit on the dining room table. You can patiently wait for the arrival of gifts that are delayed in the US Postal Service's overwhelmed delivery system. We mailed some presents to my side of our family, and the tracking update tells me that the package is still somewhere between LaPlata, Maryland and Lenoir, North Carolina. In that respect, Christmas continues.

What's more, the ball has dropped and the confetti has fallen. We're now three days into 2021. I've never heard so many people speak about how glad they were to see a particular year come to an end. The cover of a recent issue of TIME Magazine displayed 2020 with a red "X" through it, and the words, "the worst year ever." Though that summary may be debatable, there's no doubt that we've spent the last nine months facing circumstances and enduring hardships that we've never experienced.

But today's Scripture takes us back to a reality that existed before we started measuring time in years. The opening chapter of John's Gospel transports us to "the beginning," where "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (v. 1). This is lofty and eloquent language about God the Creator, who's bringing something new into existence through Jesus. We know from Genesis 1 that God makes things by speaking them into being. And Jesus is God's fullest and most decisive way of speaking. God reveals himself, communicates who he is, in and through Jesus.

God's revelation of himself to us in Jesus isn't like a message transmitted from a vast distance. In February of last year, scientists detected a radio signal from outer space that repeated about every 16 days for more than a year. Apparently these "fast radio bursts" originated from some sort of celestial body in a galaxy about 500 million light-years away. Scientists were careful to note that the regularity of the signal is "an important clue to the nature of this object."¹

"The nature of this object" is technical language for what this celestial body is like, and what it does. In order for us to understand it better, all we've got to go on at this point are radio signals from a distant galaxy. Thankfully this is not the way it works in God's relationship with us. The God who speaks galaxies into existence doesn't deal with us in a detached and remote way. On the contrary, Christmas is about how God himself comes to us, comes among us, is with us, through the gift of Christ. So on this first Sunday of a new year, we don't gather to explore "the nature of this object" called "God." No, we come into the presence of a God who knows, and wants to be known, a God who sent the Son in order to save us and to bring us close, into communion with himself and one another.

John says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (v. 14). Eugene Peterson renders it this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."² At the end of a year when we spent so much time staying put, especially within our own four walls, John reminds us that social distancing is no issue for God. God shows up in human form, right in the midst of us.

Last summer, one newscast including the following story:

Mary Daniel hadn't seen her husband for 114 days due to coronavirus restrictions at the senior care facility where he lives. Her husband, Steve, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's seven years ago and moved into a care facility in Jacksonville, Florida.

She said she had been visiting her husband every night and would get him ready for bed. But when the coronavirus pandemic hit, health facilities restricted visitors as a way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to vulnerable patients. The facility closed to visitors on March 11—the last time she saw Steve as a visitor.

Mary was worried about her husband spending so much time alone and said she was "desperate" to find another way to stay connected. She said, "We have separated these folks to save them, but ... the isolation will absolutely kill them. Especially dementia patients, they need interaction. They need to be touched ... so that they can grow instead of just really wither away."

Mary said, "Out of the blue, two weeks ago, the corporate office of his memory care center called me and said, 'We've got a part-time job available; would you like to take it?'" She was willing to do any job they offered for the chance to get inside, and what they ended up giving her was a dishwashing position.

The job is allowing Mary to see her husband regularly, and she's grateful for it. "It is worth it to be able to visit him, and I can already just tell the difference in his demeanor after three visits. I get to go again tonight ... it has made the world of difference for me." She said her husband now feels love—something he missed out on when they were separated. "I'm so grateful ... I am so lucky and fortunate. I want to be with him every day."³

Out of her deep love for her husband, Mary Daniel entered his world so they could be reunited. The Word became flesh. God moved in among us, took up residence with us, in order to bring us into restored communion with himself.

During the coronavirus pandemic, one part of my ministry that I've greatly missed is being able to go into nursing homes to visit individuals with whom I've formed relationships. Some of them have been individuals I knew through our church, and others are folks I made connections with just because I was there visiting someone else. I think of a woman named Mary who, as I recall, was to celebrate her one hundred and first birthday in December. Her roommate was Maria. The two of them made quite a pair, especially when Mary would start to get a little upset that Maria was trying to get too much of my time and attention. I positioned myself strategically between their beds so I could distribute my love fairly and evenly, but that didn't always work out. Sometimes it actually just complicated things.

I anticipate the day when I can return to more nursing home visitation. But for now I continue to wonder how Mary and Maria are doing. What's their condition? What are their circumstances? When we lose ordinary embodied face-to-face interaction and relationships, we lose a lot. True, in the midst of our social isolation and confinement, technology has helped us see and hear one another. Zoom and other forms of videoconferencing have been a great gift, but they're not the same as in-person, face-to-face engagement. Being

present to one another in the flesh is part of what helps make us human. We're fleshly beings, embodied souls. And our embodiedness is affirmed and underscored by the reality of the Incarnation. In order to bring us back into a right relationship with himself, God put on a face and came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh.

I have a friend who has a beautiful white dog. He once told about a time when the dog went out of the house and got up under the front porch. By the time it emerged, the dog was filthy from rolling and squirming around in the dirt. In fact, the dog was so dirty, my friend was unable to get it thoroughly clean without resorting to an unusual measure. He concluded that the best thing he could do to solve the situation was to put on his bathing suit, get in the tub with the dog, and scrub it clean. So that's what he did. And it worked. That story has always reminded me of the lengths to which God has gone to step into our situation so that our condition could be fixed and we can be the people God intends us to be. That's really the wonder of Christmas. As author Glenn Stanton puts it, "We serve a God who created our humanity, weeps at the fall of our humanity, became our humanity, and is redeeming our humanity."⁴

The year that has just concluded took its toll on our humanity. All the social distancing, sheltering in place, isolating, quarantining, masking, and other health measures have been put in place for our good, and the good of others. And that's all necessary and appropriate. But at the same time, these policies and practices have removed us from various forms of embodiment that give our lives meaning and fullness, including our life together as a church.

A lot of that will continue into 2021. Just because we've taken the first steps into a new year doesn't mean that circumstances will change dramatically. In fact, public health experts tell us that the effects of the pandemic will worsen in January and February. In some respects, the worst is still ahead of us. True, vaccines are being produced, distributed, and put into arms, but the rollout has been slower than predicted. There's light at the end of this tunnel, but we still have a long way to go in reaching the end of this season of hardship and struggle. Over the past couple of weeks, we've felt the impact of COVID-19 even more directly, as some members of our congregation have tested positive and endured physical suffering. We especially remember them in our thoughts and prayers, and in our concrete forms of ministry to them.

In fact, that's one of the ways that we extend the meaning and significance of Christmas. We proclaim and practice the Word made flesh by being an embodiment of God's love revealed in Christ. We incarnate the one who was the incarnation of God. His presence takes visible and tangible shape in the ways that we manifest his work and mission. Theologian and educator Howard Thurmond wrote a poem called "The Work of Christmas." He says:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
 When the star in the sky is gone,
 When the kings and princes are home,
 When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
 The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost, to heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people,
 To make music in the heart.

As 2021 begins, I join you in the ongoing work of Christmas. And as we get further and further into this year, I look forward to being the church with you, not only virtually but face

to face, as much as possible. And as we journey forward by faith, may we eventually emerge from the coronavirus pandemic with an even deeper appreciation for and commitment to ordinary, daily embodied human relationships where God is present and working.

¹ Doyle Rice, "Scientists detect an unexplainable radio signal from outer space that repeats every 16 days." USA TODAY website. February 12, 2020. Accessed December 20, 2020 <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/02/12/fast-radio-burst-signal-outer-space-repeats-every-16-days/4726301002/>>.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 185.

³ Caitlin O'Kane, "Woman gets job as dishwasher at senior care facility so she can see her husband with Alzheimer's," CBS News (July 10, 2020).

⁴ Glenn Stanton, "The Conservative Humanist." Christianity Today website (April 1, 2006).