

“Incarnation”
June 14, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Welcome back, church, to our summer preaching series, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith”! If you were here last week, you might remember that I am basing this series on the beautiful book of the same name by Kathleen Norris, one of the most thoughtful and prayerful writers I know.

In her book, Norris takes so-called “churchy words” (like salvation, or incarnation) – words many of us may have grown up with if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

So that’s what I would like to do during the summer with you all. I’m going to pick some of my favorite words from Norris’ book, and explore with you how we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are encountering them as if for the first time.

Last week, we looked at the very meaty word “salvation,” and began to think about this word in the same way our Hebrew ancestors might have: as a wide, open path. We asked the question: What if salvation is not so much about going to heaven when we die, but is about saying yes to the wide, life-giving path of love, justice and peace for all of God’s creation, right here and right now? What if we could do that, together? What if we could be “saved,” together – right here and right now, by walking this wide road of love?

That was last week.

This week, our word is “incarnation.” Incarnation. Another biggie, another word that we probably throw around a lot in church, but maybe don’t often pause to ponder its layered meanings.

The word “incarnation,” at its root, means “to become flesh.” That which is becoming flesh, or fleshy.

As Christians, then, we can immediately start to ask ourselves, “Okay, so *what* exactly is becoming flesh?” And I suppose our most basic and true answer is, well, *God*. In the person of Jesus Christ, God becomes flesh.

Again, something we hear a lot in church: in Christ, God becomes flesh. Blah blah blah. It might just go right over our heads, we hear it so much. But, church, wow!! Think about that for a second. God becomes flesh. Big, powerful, omnipotent, majestic God. The God who makes the heavens and the earth, the God who sits enthroned over all the cosmos, *this* God becomes measly ol’ human flesh?

Psalm 18 describes God like this:

In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.
God bowed the heavens, and came down;
thick darkness was under God’s feet.
Who rode on a cherub, and flew;
who came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
Who made darkness a covering all around,
with a canopy of thick clouds dark with water.¹

So, what we saying is that *this* God becomes flesh. This God of thundering heavens, of thick darkness. This God who rides upon the wings of the wind. This majestic, unfathomable, mysterious, powerful, *big* God incarnates: this God becomes human flesh... becomes living, breathing, sleeping, sweating, laughing, weeping, dying, rising, human flesh.

This is a bold claim. A really, really bold claim. But as Christians, that’s what we do: we claim it, again and again.

And we see it played out in our reading in this morning from Luke 1.

If you’ve ever been to a Christmas Eve service, anywhere in the world probably, I bet you know this story.

An angel named Gabriel is sent to a young woman named Mary. The angel’s got some pretty big news: “Greetings, favored one,” the angel begins. I have to say, I prefer the King James Version, though: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee.” Listen to those words again: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee.” These are powerful words, majestic words... but words uttered, as it turns out, in a totally un-majestic and unlikely setting. These are powerful, holy words spoken to about the most un-powerful person you could imagine: a young Jewish peasant girl who is not even married yet. Here we have the most ordinary, mundane, run-of-the-mill situation, infused with majesty, mystery, power and holiness.

And here we have it again: Incarnation. God is flesh. The ordinary is holy.

And... is Mary’s story so different from our own, really?

I know, you’ve probably not had the Holy Spirit come upon you in exactly this way and impregnate you with the Son of God (and if you think you have, please set up a

¹ Psalm 18, NRSV, selected verses.

call with me ASAP!), but really, aren't we, in our own ordinariness, *also* in the presence of such holiness?

If we look closely at our Christian tradition, we might start to see that so much of what we practice is almost desperately trying to point us to this holiness... all the time! Let's think about the things we do together as Christians, as the church. One of our first practices that comes to mind for me is celebrating our sacraments. Y'all know we have two, right? Our tradition lifts up two holy sacraments: baptism and communion. And just reflect for a moment on how we perform these sacraments. What do we use? Well, for baptism, we use water. That's it. And what could be more ordinary, more every day, than water? And yet, it's this most ordinary water that we believe conveys this most holy promise that we belong to God, no matter what; that, in these ordinary waters, we are named and claimed as God's own forever.

And then, there's our second sacrament: communion. Communion, where we simply eat some bread and drink some sort of grape-y liquid, either wine or grape juice. Bread and fruit. Again, what could be more mundane? And yet, it is these most ordinary things that we use to demonstrate God's love poured out for the whole world, God's love that resists and overcomes even death.

And suddenly, through this lens, if we're paying attention, *everything* we do together starts to look holy: singing, praying, fellowshiping, eating, visiting one another. These are the most commonplace acts, and yet each one of them is practically busting with holiness beyond any of our imaginings.

And here's another thing about incarnation: this holiness, this ordinary-become-extraordinary, is not just found in the church. The church points to the things we do – like celebrating the sacraments, or praying together – the church points out the holiness in such ordinary actions, but it doesn't stop there. The church doesn't leave us there, leave us here, just with ourselves. After we start to see holiness here in the church, God – through the power of the Holy Spirit, I would add – quickly leads us out into the world. Gathering in the church eventually and inevitably leads us back into the world, where we get to ask the question again: where is incarnation out there?

Where is holiness breaking through the most ordinary things in your most ordinary world, church?

Is it in a conversation you've had? An image from Facebook that has captured your imagination? Is it a song you heard, or sang? Is it in the face of a loved one, or a stranger? Can you see holiness – the incarnation of God's presence here on earth – in the sun? The trees? The ants? The dirt?

I want to make one more point about incarnation.

Let's look at the angel's language again in Luke. Gabriel says to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...." I think what the angel is getting at is this: when incarnation is happening, we can't really capture it, or put it into words. A mystery is happening. A darkness is unfolding. Or, as Kathleen Norris puts it, "When a place or time seems touched by God, it is an overshadowing, [and even more, it is] a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans."²

² Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 31.

Here's the thing, church: when we let ourselves be taken by incarnation, when we start to really believe that there is holiness everywhere, suddenly, nothing looks the same. And often, what we thought was so important fades away. Kathleen Norris says it best: with incarnation, there is "a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans."³

What are your priorities? What are your plans?

Another way to ask this may be: What do you think you have control over? I'm going to let this question stir for a moment. [Silence].

What do I think I have control over? With incarnation – with this great overshadowing, this great reversal of what I think is holy and what I think is ordinary and what I think is important and what I think is not – suddenly all of my plans, my priorities, my gripping, my fear... all of it changes, all of it shifts.

Do my greed and insecurity lead me to believe that to have any worth at all, I need to keep up with the Joneses? Well, incarnation tells me another story: that I am held in the arms of God, protected, and loved; and that, in God, I already have everything that I need. So there's no longer an impulse to compare, to strive and strain.

Does my fear tell me that I need only to look out for myself and my family? Incarnation lends another voice: it whispers to me there is holiness in every family, in every person... so I'd better get to work to insure and protect the dignity and humanity and safety of everyone, and I mean *everyone*: including black and brown, poor and marginalized, immigrant and imprisoned.

Do I think I need to be right all the time? Incarnation reminds me that every living person is a child of God, made in God's image, and so, everyone has something to teach me. Incarnation, if I'm not careful, just may lead me to my knees.

It's scary to have the ground move under us like this. It's scary to be in shadow like this, to not know or understand everything, to not be able to explain it away. But Kathleen Norris articulates a beautiful promise at the end of her chapter on incarnation. She assures us that even this shadow can be a blessing. "But even in terrible circumstances and calamities, even in matters of life and death, if I sense that I am in the shadow of God, I find light, so much light that my vision improves dramatically. I know that holiness is near."⁴

Incarnation: Holiness is near.

This week, I challenge you, and me, and all of us, to be open to those moments of incarnation, to this holiness all around us and in every patch and every person of this world. I can promise you, church, we are surrounded by it, infused by it, grounded by it. Even here. Even now.

Holy Spirit, open our hearts.

Thanks be to God.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*