



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – December 13, 2009

Who Is Jesus? The Word Made Flesh  
The Reverend Dr. David L. Bartlett

## John 1:1-18

The Word Became Flesh

*1*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. *2*He was in the beginning with God. *3*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being *4*in him was life,<sup>a</sup> and the life was the light of all people. *5*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *6*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. *7*He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. *8*He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. *9*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.<sup>b</sup>

*10*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. *11*He came to what was his own,<sup>c</sup> and his own people did not accept him. *12*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, *13*who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

*14*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,<sup>d</sup> full of grace and truth. *15*(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") *16*From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. *17*The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. *18*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,<sup>e</sup> who is close to the Father's heart,<sup>f</sup> who has made him known.

### I.

When I was six or seven I appeared for the first time in a Christmas pageant. I was not much of an actor,

<sup>a</sup> Or *3*through him. And without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. *4*In him was life

<sup>b</sup> Or He was the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world

<sup>c</sup> Or to his own home

<sup>d</sup> Or the Father's only Son

<sup>e</sup> Other ancient authorities read *It is an only Son, God* or *It is the only Son*

<sup>f</sup> Gk bosom

but you will not be surprised to know I was pretty much of a talker, so I was assigned to be one of the narrators.

I stood in the middle of the chancel of the First Baptist Church of Evanston, Illinois and recited the words I had memorized from the King James Bible.

"And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid."

Now when I grew older and when the newer translations came along I realized that what Luke meant when he said the shepherds were sore afraid was that they were terrified, very afraid.

But at seven years old I thought I knew exactly what Luke meant; they were sore afraid, so afraid that their sides hurt and they were short of breath. Sore.

Many a day I was sore afraid, because each weekday afternoon I set out on the road from Orrington School to my home on Lincoln Street and many weekday afternoons I was waylaid by the Bogen gang. Tom and Mike Bogen and their cohort of tiny thugs loved to hide in the bushes along the road, and as I walked by to rush out from the bushes, grab me, and throw me to the ground. I was often sore afterwards; I was always sore before, sore afraid.

The Christmas stories are about God overcoming fear. In Luke's Gospel people are afraid of the powers that might oppress them...their own Bogen gang.

In Matthew's Gospel people are afraid of losing their way. They always worry about wandering astray...like the poor magi who almost don't make it to the manger.

In John's Gospel people are afraid of the dark. They're afraid that from birth to death we wander around lonely

and ignorant and when we die we just die into deeper darkness.

So the Gospel writers tell Christmas stories to show us how God overcomes fear.

In Luke, Jesus is the mercy of God, a baby lying in a manger whose mercy is stronger than the strongest king.

In Matthew Jesus is the wisdom of God; he shows us the way even more clearly than the star guides the wise men.

But in John—in John’s Gospel Jesus IS God.

## II.

So while Luke starts with the manger and the shepherds and Matthew starts with Mary’s house and the wise men, John starts at the very beginning—the beginning of all creation. And while Luke and Matthew tell Christmas stories, John sings a Christmas carol. He gives us a poem about the birth of Christ.

John’s poem says that even when creation began God the creator was all mixed up with God the savior. Now the word John used for God the savior was the word “Word”.

I know that sounds like the beginning of a comedy routine. “What’s John’s word for the Savior?...Word...That’s what I just said.”

And it’s not just that God the creator was all mixed up with God the savior, when Jesus started to talk about creator and savior he got a little bit mixed up, too. In one sentence he says: “The Word was with God.” And in the next sentence he says: “The Word was God.”

At the end of his Christmas story John says something complicated but not really mixed up at all: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory.”

## III.

Here’s the amazing deal. Here is John’s Christmas carol. It is absolutely true that at Christmastime God sent Jesus to save us from the powers that oppress us. And it’s absolutely true that at Christmastime God sent Jesus to show us the way from all our wanderings.

But one thing more says John. At Christmastime, God sent us God’s own self. To be the light in the midst of our darkness.

A few centuries later the church tried to figure out a way to describe how it could be that Jesus was a man who delivers us and guides us and could somehow also be God dwelling with us.

And the formula the church came up with said that Jesus was very God and very man or in more contemporary language, Jesus was entirely God and entirely human.

Now I want to use a homely analogy—homely in two ways: kind of down home, but also about looking kind of plain.

Some years after my debut as the narrator in the Christmas pageant I was still standing up in front of people and making speeches. And it came to pass that one day I gave a speech in front of another group of church people in another town, and one of the women who heard the speech was not impressed. So she wrote a note to my parents in which she managed to insult all three of us at the same time.

And here is what she said. She said: “Unfortunately young David has inherited his father’s looks and his mother’s brains.”

Leave aside the slander for the moment--. My father was very distinguished looking and my mother is very smart--, but what this ineffable person was saying was that she thought she could divvy me up between my father’s part of me, the looks, and my mother’s part of me, the intellect.

To this day I have seminary students reading New Testament stories who try to figure out what’s the God part of Jesus and what’s the human part of Jesus. The human part of Jesus wept when Lazarus died, but then fortunately the God part of Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb. The God part of Jesus walked on the water

but the human part of Jesus must not have recognized the disciples because he was about to pass them by when they cried out and got his attention.

That's not the way John wants to tell the story or Jesus to interpret it. Entirely God and entirely human; not one thing one minute and another thing the next.

#### IV.

Very smart and faithful theologians have tried from the third century into the twenty-first to explain how Jesus could be both human and divine.

Here is a simple attempt which leaves out a great deal but may help us on the way.

In Jesus Christ we see what it really is to be human; and in Jesus Christ we see what it really is to be God. Jesus is not human one one minute and divine the next, but both those things truly, all the time.

Jesus is compassionate because God is entirely compassion and because at our most human we are compassionate too.

Jesus gets angry at injustice because God is just and because human who are made in God's image strive toward justice, too.

So, says John, we don't really have to turn our backs on Jesus to find out what it means to be fully human. Jesus shows us that. And we don't have to sneak behind Jesus to see what the God who set him looks like because Jesus shows us that, too.

#### V.

In this same passage, in this same Christmas carol, John says it in another way, perhaps not quite as richly but a little more clearly.

“What came into being in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Remember I said that in John's Gospel what we're afraid of is the darkness—the darkness of loneliness,

the darkness of confusion, the darkness that waits us at the end of life.

Except for Jesus. Except for the light that keeps shining in the darkness. Except for the moment when God sees how much we fear the darkness and God lights the light; God sends the light; God is the light.

A woman I knew when I was a child told the story about her own childhood Christmas. The children in her family were excited by the new toys they got at Christmas day and took them out to play with them in the snow. But the day was short, and the dark fell quickly and they came dashing into the home to get warm. Leaving the toys.

Their mother noticed that the toys were still lying in the yard, and being a mother sent the children forth to gather all the gifts they had scattered carelessly about. But when they went out to the dark, she stood on their home's front step, holding a lighted candle. And calling out again and again and again: “I am here.” “I am here.” “I am here.”

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us; we have beheld his glory.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Does not overcome it. Will not overcome it.

Merry Christmas. **Amen.**