

WGUMC December 23, 2012 "God *con carne*" Luke 2:1-7

It was a cold, clear, beautiful day on Wednesday. I got to the parking lot at Almaden Quicksilver County Park about 8 a.m., and my car thermometer said 33°. In gloves and shorts, I ran up the Mine Hill Trail and stopped to catch my breath at the top. There was frost on the picnic table where I like to sit and pray. So, on this picture-perfect December day, I took off my glove and etched the word "Emmanuel" (God with us) in that frozen dew. As I kept running, the temperature kept rising, and by the time I got back to the table, the frost had disappeared. My graffiti was gone. And I wondered, so is this how God is with us? Here one moment and then gone?

It may seem that way oftentimes in our lives, that God is like a mist in the morning, like dew on the grass, or frost on the pumpkin. But the Gospel of Luke on this morning says something quite different. It's easy for us to love this story, but it's just as easy for others to dismiss it. Skeptics will gleefully point out all the problems with it. First, there is no mention of the birth of Jesus in the earliest

Christian writings we have. The letters of Paul don't mention it. And neither do two of the four Gospels (Mark and John). Outside of the Bible, there is no historical record of any decree sent out by Emperor Augustus for a census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. How certain can we be of this story? And what about our own additions to it? Read the text, there's no barn and no animals in it. Even the Pope admits that. But all of their complaining misses the point. Whether or not a baby was born in a barn doesn't really matter. That's not the miracle. What's really going on in this story is far more radical.

The most radical doctrine in the Christian Church is the doctrine of the incarnation. The idea that God would come "in the flesh," *con carne*, shows just how far God is willing to go for us: essentially giving up divinity in order to fix up our humanity. So God isn't just an idea in our heads or even a feeling in our hearts that, like frost on a cold morning, is here and then disappears. No. The

story about the birth of Jesus is a story about God's divinity taking the plunge into a very messy humanity.

On the deepest level, this story isn't history or even theology. One of the best preachers of the last century (Harry Emerson Fosdick) said that what God is doing in Jesus Christ is much more nearly poetry. That's why we'd rather sing carols than listen to sermons: "Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail th'incarnate Deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. Hark! the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King!'" [Charles Wesley]

Even though Charles Wesley didn't write it, the story of the birth of Jesus reads more like the lyrics of a song. And the song says that God CAN come into OUR human life because God DID come into the human life of Jesus. God didn't just SEND Jesus. God wasn't just WITH Jesus. The church has always said that God really CAME in Jesus, was MADE FLESH in Jesus.

Jesus is God *con carne*. [*carne* is Latin for "flesh."] And if that says something wonderful about God, it says something even more

amazing about us. First of all, because Jesus was human, no one can say that humanity is totally depraved and corrupt and irredeemable. The Word becoming flesh gives great honor to our flesh. Secondly, God became human so that we humans can become vessels of God. So, look at Jesus and you can catch a glimpse of the possibilities for us when the Divine life is released through our humanity!

Look at Jesus. He cured a leper. There was no cure for leprosy at the time. But looking at him, can you imagine a world without malaria and other preventable diseases of poverty? The United Methodist Church can. So far, we've raised over \$26 million towards the effort. We're on track to meet our goal of \$75 million.

Look at Jesus. He refused to condemn an adulterer. The one with no sin forgave the sinner and challenged anyone without sin to throw the first stone. Looking at Jesus, can you envision a Congress where mutual confession takes the place of condemnation? Where humility is practiced instead of hypocrisy? Where politicians strive to finish the work they are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, with

malice toward none and charity for all? Can you envision this?

Abraham Lincoln could. (Read the book, *Team of Rivals*. Go see the movie by Stephen Spielberg!)

Look at Jesus. He did condemn violence. On the night of his arrest, Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, as if to say (to paraphrase the NRA), "The only way to stop a bad guy with a sword is a good guy with a sword." But Jesus told him to put it away, for those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Looking at Jesus, can you imagine a country that comes to the conclusion that the way to address school shootings is not by putting more guns in schools? Can you conceive of us giving up our addiction to violence and taking up a passion for peace, beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks? The prophets Isaiah and Micah could.

Look at Jesus. He confronted the powers that be and defended the poor of his country. Keeping your eyes on Jesus, can you picture a place where power is used to free and not to fetter Christ's little ones? Where those who work can earn enough to live? Where those

who can't work are given opportunities to create meaning for their lives? Look at Jesus. He called the children to him and promised his kin-dom to them. Looking at Jesus, can you work for a time when all children will be welcome, and all youth will be loved and nurtured, and fed, housed, clothed, educated, vaccinated? The Open Table can.

The Open Table program for lifting people out of poverty one at a time is one attempt to imagine such a world. To the folks who will be participating in the first two tables after the first of the year, I say this: All through Advent, I've been talking about meeting Jesus. I've talked about expectation and I've talked about interruption and I've talked about celebration. But if you really want to meet Jesus, you're going to have to understand something about incarnation. God comes into OUR flesh. So don't go looking someplace else for Jesus. If you want to meet Jesus, go be Jesus. Our Open Table volunteers are going to be the hands and feet, the back and brains, the heart and soul of Jesus for someone who needs some God *con*

*carne* in their life. There is no real presence of God on this planet except that which lives in us.

That's why the church is called the Body of Christ. Because WE are the flesh that God comes into. WE are the miracle that's about to happen this Christmas. I know. We're a long way from a baby in a manger. But the baby was just the beginning. I told you that the incarnation is radical. So take some time this Christmas to look at Jesus and catch a glimpse of what you could be, can be.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again. I know for certain that each of you will have the opportunity to be Jesus for someone this week. You will have the chance in some situation, however insignificant it seems, to put the *con carne* on the Christmas story. As we gather around the Lord's Table and share in the home-made whole wheat bread I baked, we will receive the Body of Christ, but only so far as and to the extent that we are prepared to be the Body of Christ, the Word made flesh for our world. Barn or no barn, cow or

no cow, the Bethlehem story means this: Because God came in the flesh, our flesh can bring God to others. So be it. Go to it. Amen.