

The Spiritual Practice of Incarnation

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Scripture: The Gospel of John, Chapter 1; The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. What came into being was Life and the life was the light of all people. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen this glory, full of grace and truth.

And so now, by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us - to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death - and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Poem: The miracle of God comes not only from above.
It also comes through us; it is also dwelling in us.
It has been given to every person
and it lies in every soul as something divine,
and it waits. ~ *Eberhard Arnold*

Sermon:

Almost before I can catch my breath from the seasonal rhythms of fall, with the names of my saints still resonating in my heart, with the last small bits of Thanksgiving turkey and the sweet potatoes still carefully sealed in Tupperware in my refrigerator with not even quite enough left for dinner tonight, almost before I can catch my breath, I hear in my inner ear that haunting melody, "O come, O come, Emmanuel." And I am called again to the familiar yet always unique journey that is Advent. I am called again to walk that bumpy road toward Christmas, a road that takes me through all the challenges of my daily life, through all the perils of crassness and consumerism, through all the grim realities of this world, and all the emotions of joy and loss and hurts and love. I am called again to walk that uneven path that will lead me back to this very place in just a little over four weeks, on that Christmas Eve night of promise, with shining stars in the darkness and all the hopes and joy of new birth. And I must tell you that I believe in this Advent journey; it is the only way I know to find any sense of the Christmas that matters to me.

The journey begins now, with those words we heard: "Stay. Sit. Ponder. Wait. Wonder." The journey begins now, with those words we sang: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and bless the place your people dwell, Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and bring the splendor of your light."

What this Advent journey is all about is incarnation – that long, and for me favorite theological word, which tells us that the essence of God becomes flesh and lives with us and lives within us. While the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give us the beautiful stories of Jesus' birth, with angels and shepherds and wise ones and Joseph and Mary, the Gospel of John has no birth story. Instead John tells us that the Word (capital W), the very power of creation, is and always has been in God. And that the Word became a human being, full of grace and truth, living among us.

Furthermore, this incarnation, this Emmanuel (which means God with us) happens over and over again, and it happens with you and it happens with me. God is born in our bodies, and the word becomes flesh again and again. God walks around in human skin. That is the fundamental, foundational message of Christmas.

Now isn't it odd that we celebrate this good news of incarnation every Advent, every Christmas, and yet most of us have such a love-hate relationship with our bodies? Barbara Brown Taylor notes that "Where Christians are concerned, we are in the peculiar position of being followers of the Word made Flesh and yet we neglect our own flesh or worse view our bodies with shame or scorn." (*Barbara Brown Taylor's chapter "The Practice of Wearing Skin," in her book An Altar in the World, Harper One, 2009*) If we give anything beyond lip service to the idea of incarnation – that God lives within us – then our bodies are the dwelling place of the holy. And small or large, sick or well, lovely or irregular, we have a lot to be grateful for, all things considered.

I have my own what I call love-doubt relationship with my body. I'm always looking at current pictures of myself and noticing what doesn't look quite right. I had an epiphany this summer as I was cleaning off a shelf in my study and I came across a picture of me, taken when I was in my thirties. My first reaction was, "Wow! I really look beautiful in this picture." My second thought was "Why wasn't I able to celebrate and affirm that then?" And I just know that I'm going to look back, when I am 80, at pictures of myself now and say, "Wow! I really looked good then. What was I complaining about?"

And let me remind you that Incarnation includes all of our bodies, at any age, at any stage. It is, I think, most easy to see the incarnation of God in flesh when we hold a baby. Perhaps that is why the Christmas story reaches so quickly into our hearts. But what about our bodies as we age, when we are ill, when we die? The God I believe in is present throughout my life, in all its ages and stages. If you read the whole Christmas story in Luke, you will find other folks there besides Jesus and Mary and Joseph. There are Elizabeth and Zachariah, long past the expected age of childbearing, who have a son, John who grows up to become John the Baptist. There is an older man named Simeon and an 84 year old woman named Anna who both embody the Holy in their encounter with Jesus and his parents. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that throughout our lives God is with us, giving us strength, when we soar like young eagles, when we walk like adults, or when we can only sit or lie down. God is still with us and within us.

Larry's mother Alberta died of a combination of ALS and abdominal cancer. In the last weeks of her life, we cared for her in our house. She was her finest, most beautiful self in those days: very present, wanting to read the psalms and pray, speaking of her faith and her confidence that she would see her father and mother, her dear husband John, again. There is no doubt for me that God was with her and embodied within her throughout that difficult time, even as she let go of this life. Incarnation not about bodily perfection or mobility or our state of physical health. It is about the Word (capital W), the Holy dwelling within us, full of truth and grace, and about all the ways we embody that Word in our lives and to one another and to this world.

What would it be like for me, for you, to wear this marvelous gift, this sacred wrapping of our skin with gratitude?* What would it be like to practice incarnation daily,

to be in our bodies with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh in teachings and experiences as old as the Gospels themselves.

Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash each other's feet and to share supper? He knew that, when he was gone, his friends would need something so real, so physical, that they would not be able to simply intellectualize it. So Jesus gave them things they could get their hands on, things that required them to get close enough to touch one another, in the washing of feet, in the sharing of a meal, in the caring for one another. *(This paragraph draws upon Barbara Brown Taylor's chapter "The Practice of Wearing Skin," in her book An Altar in the World, Harper One, 2009)*

And when we do this, when we get close enough to touch each other's lives, to serve one another, we are the incarnation of spiritual community. If God lives within each of us, then God also lives abundantly among us as we gather together. The true sacrament of the church is one another, all our bodies here together in the flesh, worshiping, praying, singing, sharing meals, sharing our lives, our sorrows and our joys and embodying our faith together. Reading this bulletin, reading a copy of this sermon, even listening to the CD of this service, are all wonderful ways to catch up with what happens here in worship, but none of them are the same as being here, experiencing spiritual community in the flesh.

"At Advent," says Anne Lamott in her book Plan B, "what I try to do is stay close to God and my friends. I notice the darkness, I light a few candles, I scatter some seeds, I show up where I am needed, I try to help – and I do all this as part of my spiritual community."

I invite you to an embodied Advent journey this year, a path as old as scripture but as new as this day. Advent and Christmas are not journeys of the intellect, not journeys of creed, but journeys of experience, journeys that we make with our whole selves. The Christmas story is not a thesis to be debated, but a story to hear, and see, and taste, and smell, and touch like a child with all your senses. This story will come to you in different ways each Sunday, and I invite you to open your body, open your senses, to receive it. Walk your way into Advent with your feet grounded on the Labyrinth this week. Next Sunday, see the Christmas story embodied in our children as they present it to you. See the Christmas story embodied in the angel gifts we bring to share with those in need of hope. Hear the Christmas story in our service of Lessons and Carols in the voices of our singers, in the sounds of our musicians and on the lips of our readers. I can go on and on here – the tastes of Christmas in the food we share this season; the smells of Christmas in trees and greens and candles; the tangible approach of Christmas in the elf and the Advent wreath. And then it all comes together on Christmas Eve with a feast of the senses: of light, and sound, and taste, and touch and a tangible palpable spirit of love and hope as we gather together that night.

So let's all give up our grumbling about commercialism and rushing and all the trite and unwelcome parts of the Christmas culture, and instead let's set off together on an Advent journey that affirms the message of God incarnate, God being born within us. Let's embody that message of Incarnation as our spiritual practice this season and as we embody Christmas, God's message of light and hope coming to dwell with us, then we too will bring hope and light to all those whose lives we touch.

And I invite you to help me end this sermon by repeating after me, each line of the poem that is printed in your bulletin. We're going to pause at the end of each line for a moment to let it resonate within us. At the end, we'll sit a moment in silence before our closing prayer.

I know not always how God comes,
But that God comes, this I know:
 in an obscure stable,
 in splashing waters,
in the breaking of bread,
and often, my friend,
 incarnate in you.
 - *Bonnie Belasic*

Closing Prayer:

As we begin our Advent journey, we pray to remember in the days to come to find moments to sit, to ponder and to wait, to be open to your presence, O God.

We pray to open all our senses – to see, to hear, to taste, to smell, to touch – the wonder that is Your Word made flesh among us and within us.

There will still be difficult times, moments when the rough places of our lives will seem like mountains, moments when the grim realities of our world will seem insurmountable. So we pray for persistence and patience, that we may truly know Your light does shine, even in the darkest of times, and that we carry that light within us as well.

May we, in whatever ways we can, embody Your Word to those who are in need of that good news, that welcome of acceptance, that offer of hope.

By your tender mercy, O God, may the bright star of Christmas shine upon us to give light to all who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen. Blessed be.