
The Word Made Flesh?

John 1:10–18

Poet *Madeleine L'Engle* has a memorable line in one of her poems on the Incarnation of Christ at Christmas, speaking of the moment when God kissed the world. Now, I grew up Baptist—speaking of kissing in church feels a bit taboo; But on this Second Sunday of Christmas, we have to sit with the intimacy of “the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us”. The poem goes . . .

*Then silence will be broken;
The time will come when with a shout
Of laughter,
Or a cry of pain,
With the breaking of breath,
Or a baby's first cry,
God will kiss this world.*

It made me think of another song lyric by contemporary Christian musician, David Crowder, who sang, “[H]eaven meets earth like a sloppy, wet kiss . . . When I think about the way that God loves us.” Now, that lyric became somewhat controversial when I was younger; So, later, many of the churches who sang that worship song, *How He Loves Us*, changed the words to: “Heaven meets earth like an *unforeseen* kiss . . . ”

For many, thinking of the Incarnation as God’s “sloppy, wet kiss” was going too far in being so suggestive and explicit. Yet, something may be lost when we neuter the intimacy of the Christ event at Christmas: God, bending to kiss the world, with great, even extravagant affection in the Incarnation. Literally meaning, “embodied” or “taking on flesh”, “The Word became flesh...”

There is a vulnerability to being in the flesh.
To be flesh, is to be creaturely.

To be flesh, is to feel, it implies proximity.

To be flesh is to subject yourself to creaturely rejection, even harm.

To be flesh, is to respond, to be able to adapt.

To be flesh is intimate.

Are these the ways we would choose to describe God? Yet, this is how we come to know who God is? It is through this *enfleshing*, this Incarnation. We begin there. This is our entry point into understanding the relationship.

The opening poem in the Gospel of John speaks of the Incarnation a little differently than other poets. Here, God initiates the kiss but only as an invitation—a call waiting for a response. In the prologue of John, God is a willing Lover, yet one who patiently waits to be received, to be known. History shows us the difference between power that intervenes and enforces its will and love that invites. Intervention changes outcomes. Invitation changes people. The Word made flesh, comes to the world—to you and I—as an invitation.

I was thinking this week about that iconic scene in the movie *Hitch*? Do you remember this: When Hitch, the character played by Will Smith is coaching Albert Brennaman, played by Kevin James, how to properly kiss someone—not by giving him a script, but by teaching him the art of restraint. Albert, who hires Hitch to teach him how to get the girl of his dreams, admittedly knows very little about what it takes to win over this girl.

The lesson in this scene is that a kiss is not something to seize; it's something you approach. More of a question to be answered than a technical problem to be solved. You move slowly. You pay attention. You let closeness happen organically rather than demanding it for yourself. Hitch tells Albert, that a kiss is successful when you lean in 90% of the way, and wait, causing the partner to make up the other 10% and accept the invitation. It's the lure of connection that draws the other in. And the invitation is either reciprocated or refused, but there's always a choice. Of course, the most memorable part of this lesson is how Will Smith's character jumps back when Albert eagerly chooses to lean in the full 100% and plant one on his mentor.

For me, the Incarnation is a bit like this. The Word that was in the beginning, “. . . entered our world, a world He made”—God leans into Creation and comes intimately near, “. . . yet the world did not recognize Him. Even though He came to His own people, they refused to listen and receive Him.” The world

refused to go the rest of the way and receive it. We might replace “the world” with “we” here. “Christ entered our world . . . yet WE did not recognize Him. Even though He came to His own people, WE refused to listen and receive Him. Or if we’re really brave, replace it with “I”. “ . . . yet *I* did not recognize . . . *I* refused to listen and receive . . .”

“But to all *who received him, who believed* in his name, he gave *power* to become children of God.” I don’t think I’ve paid enough attention to this line of the poem. What does it mean to *receive* the Incarnation and what is this *power* to become children of God? Other translations say, “He gave them the right to be *reborn* as children of God.”

Now, we make the claim with boldness that all are God’s children—You, me, our worst enemies: All made in the image of God and claimed by God according to God’s gracious act of self-sacrificial love. Even in this text, positioning Christ at the beginning of Creation—and given that, “all are *in Christ*”—means that everything is held together by this common heritage. *All* are God’s children. This is the basis of the good news. We start with radical belonging. But something else, here, is held out for the ones who *receive* the gift, perhaps even something quite powerful, something tied to our very essence as children.

This season, I’ve been consuming the powerful Christmas poetry of Howard Thurman, some of which have made their way into my sermons over these weeks. Today, I want to share perhaps my all-time favorite. On this eve of Epiphany, and now with Christmas day behind us, we have only just *begun* to answer the question posed to us by the Incarnation. Thurman writes of “The Work of Christmas”:

*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.

This is a tall order but it's how we partner with God in the world as co-creators. One commentator says that one of the greatest temptations of this blessed season is to put Christ in Christmas only then to leave him there. It is to receive with joy the good news of the Incarnation at Christmas yet fail to continue helping *the Word become flesh* the other 364 days of the year. As if it was a one-time deal.

Father Richard Rohr, in his book *The Universal Christ*, emphasizes from this Gospel passage verse 9, which leads into our reading for this morning. It says, "The true light that enlightens every person *was coming* into the world." He points out that the verb "*was coming*" (*erxo-menom*, in the Greek) is an action verb, and speaks not of a Big Bang, one time Incarnation, "but an ongoing, progressive movement continuing in the ever-unfolding creation . . . the ongoing promise of eternal resurrection."

To receive the Incarnation, the True Light, will take a daily decision and commitment from you and me. It will determine whether or not the Word will become flesh and dwell among us in our time . . . today, and every day. As this past year has come to a close, I've been revisiting some of what you wrote on post-it notes and stuck to our Reformation Door here in this room back in October.

I'm reminded and encouraged that you seem to get some of what *the work of Christmas* will entail this new year 2026.

Here is some of what you said:

- "I want to be better at keeping up with people we don't see in church often"
- "I want to show compassion and humanity"
- "To refocus on radical love, for my neighbor and my enemy"
- "To be more open to meeting new people"
- "I want to be more supportive towards my friends, family, and community."
- "To reach out to migrant workers"
- "To see more congregational involvement"
- "More understanding and empathy"
- "Less judgment of others and self"
- "To treat migrants with compassion and grace"
- "To pray for people who are ill to be healed"

—“I am trying to be more forgiving”

This is just a sampling. And I think you get it. This year, *the work of Christmas* is just beginning. And as we are re-boxing our decorations and throwing away the tinsel from the tree, the essential part of Christmas lingers as a question: How will you and I *enflesh* the Word . . . in our families, our workplaces, our goals and plans, our calendars, our community, in our church? This will be how we receive God’s gift.

In closing, I’ve never really been one for New Year’s resolutions, though I know they are helpful for so many people. If that’s you, I say, “Embrace the new you this January!” Maybe it’s because Spring feels more like the season to start new things: Spring flowers are coming up, new life is sprouting all around, the weather is changing. But given our odd calendar, the dead of winter hardly feel like the best time to start something new.

I think of Christina Rossetti’s Christmas carol which begins:

“In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.”

Not many like to sing this somber carol during the holidays, which is in our hymnal. Bleak winters, long cold nights, and leafless trees don’t seem to speak much to Christmas joy and spirit. Maybe the whole point—and certainly the message of this carol—is that it was into a raw and harsh world that Jesus came. And without incarnating love and hope in the midst of the ordinary and mundane, we live in the evil White Witch’s *Narnia*, where it’s “Always winter but never Christmas.” The power of the Christmas story is in the ordinary: caring for the vulnerable, treating others with goodwill and compassion, attending to the sick and lonely.

As you make your resolutions this new year, may it include a re-commit to do the small things with great love. It will be through the ordinary and mundane that the Word becomes flesh in 2026. May it be so.