

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | John 1:1–14

Date | December 24, 2020



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Merry Christmas everyone! We may not be together this Christmas Eve, but we are celebrating all the same. I trust that you have sung along at home with our beautiful choirs, and rejoiced to recall once more that glorious message of the angels that Jesus Christ is born. I pray that you, your family and loved ones near and far will know the love that greets us this holy night in the Christ child. Christ our Savior is born. A light for the whole world.

It has been a year when we have needed light. I certainly found the news a couple of weeks back to be lighter than usual when word came from across the pond that the world's first recipients had gotten the vaccination ball rolling. I wonder if you also noticed that among those first to get the vaccine was one, William Shakespeare, from Warwickshire, no less the county of birth of the other Englishman bearing that name. Because we have needed to laugh more than ever these past many months, it was no surprise to see the word plays roll in - this was Shakespeare after all. 81 year old Mr. Shakespeare was now being dubbed 'The Gentleman of Corona', and that his vaccination was the start of the 'Taming of the Flu'. Was his right arm 'to be or not to be' where the shot would be taken? You could go on, and for a good few days the British did, and why not, the vaccine is extraordinary good news, at the end of a year when good news has been in short supply.

That our modern day Bard of Warwickshire would be a recipient on the first day of the vaccine's distribution is, in the words of The Tempest's Prospero, 'such stuff as dreams are made on', as is our own story, the story of great joy that we proclaim this Christmas Eve. Tonight we make our way from Genesis - with Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden and the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will at last have a son, on to Isaiah's prophetic hope - that the wolf will lie down with the lamb - then finally to Luke and Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus. It is a beautiful, wondrous, old, old story. We teach it to our children, we celebrate it in word and song, we enact it in the tradition of gift-giving to loved ones and in the hospitality we extend to strangers this time of year. It is a story of the best of who we are and of the promise we hold in common that light does shine in the darkness, no matter how deep that darkness falls upon the land. And at the climax, if you can forgive the anachronism, the holy scriptures get a little Shakespearean, as the poetry of John's gospel prologue proclaims a mystical Word, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.

Yet, this year, word and flesh seem less abstract than usual. For almost ten months now we have been living with a word very much to do with our flesh, with our embodied lives. Covid has been an unavoidable word, not merely pressed upon our ears and presented before our eyes; it has been a word inevitably yoked to our bodies, changing so very much about how our flesh has been lived in this year. With a heightened awareness of the significance of other people's bodies to our own, we have become ever mindful of our proximity to others, so much more sensitive to everyday actions like coughs and face-coverings. The simplest expressions of affection - the handshakes and hugs we were previously so spendthrift in offering to others - have now been put on hold as we have kept our distance from other flesh. It was Covid that became flesh this year.

What's more, you have gone on an almightily strenuous journey within your bodies this year. Those of you who are parents of school-age kids have lived in a proximity to those children not seen since they were infants. School, home, work, play have all had to happen in one single place. Flesh has bumped into flesh. Even if you have made a pod of some sort or other, the circle of bodies your lives have close contact with has shrunk dramatically. Even more profoundly so for those of you who live alone, or those whose health precludes human company in the time of a pandemic. You have had to reckon with your own bodies. Your own solitariness. And this season of Christmas might be a time when the singular nature of life right now feels especially hard. Others of you have been Zooming to work at home, secretly or not so secretly wishing that the world wide web would crash for a week or two to give us all a break from staring at each other in 2-D. Some of you have been out there, in the now less populated world of the great outside. Some still having to travel for work or to see loved ones in need of care and support. Some having to work to keep the rest of us safe – those whose labor truly is essential to all of us, and for your sacrifice we hold a deep and profound thanks. And, there are those among us for whom this Christmas is a time of sorrow and loss. Those who feel the absence of loved ones no longer here. You all have my heartfelt prayers. God loves you, we love you, you are not alone.

For a year that has been repetitive in so many ways, it feels remarkably full, heavy almost, a lot to carry to this point, which is why I want to offer the simplest of invitations this Christmas Eve: lay those burdens down. Perhaps only for a moment, maybe just as a symbol of that wish, yet come, if you will, to the manger, to the one whose utterly vulnerable human life also came into this world. Might you come, with all that weighs upon you, all the trouble and stress that you carry and lay it down at the feet of the Christ child?

It's hard, perhaps, for us to imagine that. We have had to be doers so very much this year. We have had to take such clear and constant care of our lives, of the very flesh that we live in, that we have become thoroughly accustomed to doing, to acting, conditioned to be the ones who will take charge of our embodied selves. Yet, the story of Christmas is not a story of our self-sufficiency, not as individuals nor as a human race. It is a story of God's grace, the invitation that asks not what we now can do, but what we now can receive and be.

I invite you to come to the infant, lying in the manger, and lay down the burden of this year so that you might be freed, even for a moment, to receive the gift that God offers to you: the life that is the light of all people. That is John's poetic theology of this Word made flesh. This holy light of Christ is life itself. It is the origins of all life, the Word that was in the beginning with God and who was God, through whom all things were made.

To lay down our burdens, to come to the scene of Jesus' birth ready to receive him, is how we can also be flesh that the Word of God becomes. So, come, and be filled with a love that will never let you go, and will never, ever let go of those for whom we pray, the sick and those who have gone on to glory. Come, and receive the joy that rings out for the whole world, that stays close to us even in our times of struggle and sadness. Come, and make home in the life of the infant king, a vulnerable child and the maker of heaven and earth, trusting that God's gracious love is already all that you need to be fully alive, and worthy, and accepted; all that you need to be freely and truly you, a unique expression of Word made flesh God has loved from the beginning of time.

In a year when so much has been said about the trials of this life, the great, good news of Christmas is that it is God who has the first and the last word, and that Word is here with us now, wherever we are worshiping this Christmas Eve. It is the Word, 'full of grace and truth' that I have lived my life by and in whom I ground all my hope. It is the Word that we are all born to love, spoken to us across the vastness of the cosmos into the intimacy of our hearts. That Word became flesh, and still dwells among us, and we have beheld its glory; in you, in me, in all that has life. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.