

Dear friends in Christ, grace & peace....

Little Susie was almost too small to take part in the Christmas pageant, but there she was at the first rehearsal. The director didn't want to disappoint Susie, but didn't quite know what to do with her, either. Susie stuttered, so a speaking part was out of the question. She was hyperactive; her part needed to be early in the program, so Susie could go and sit with her parents. The best idea was to have Susie start the program. When the curtains opened, she would step out on center stage with a large cardboard sign with the single word 'WELCOME'. She would hold up the sign for everyone to see, then gracefully exit, stage left. It seemed simple enough: "Susie, you are going to be a word, a word so everyone knows they are welcome."

But at the dress rehearsal, it didn't turn out to be as simple as planned. The cardboard was too big for Susie to see over, the old angel gown she wore was too long....the result was a lot of stumbling and bumping into things and Susie fell flat on the stage floor. Finally, Susie ran off the stage in tears, saying to the director: "It isn't easy to be a word".

Susie was right. It isn't easy for anyone to be a word. It wasn't easy for our Lord. Jesus was a word, John says: 'In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....' It isn't easy being a word.

This Christmas we have listened to the birth narratives from the gospel of Luke, telling about a stable and manger and animals and shepherds. It is our favorite text of Christmas....it enables us to see God in the face of a baby. But one of the dangers of this birth story is that it can turn our understanding of God in Christ into 'babyology'. And John helps to guard against that danger by telling us in a different way how Christ came into the world. John gives us the bigger picture, beyond Bethlehem.

One of my friends became orphaned when he was 4 years old. A wealthy woman who had lost her own son at the age of eight adopted John as a gift recipient at Christmas time. She knew John's family, but had only met John a couple of times. She continued to send him a Christmas gift for over twenty five years, always a gift appropriate for a 6-9 year old. And every year John passed the gift on to some needy child. This seems like a strange situation, but it really is not so hard to understand. The woman remembered what her own son loved before his death....and she continued to buy those gifts for her 'adopted' Christmas son year after year. The gifts had no relationship to John's needs as an adult....they reflected her need to remember how someone was in the past.

As ridiculous as the situation may seem, we have a tendency to do the same in our celebration of Christmas....we tend to take a few verses from the whole narrative describing Jesus Christ....and then let these verses limit our vision of who the Savior is. Luke had one purpose in telling the story of Jesus....John had another purpose. Luke convinces us of the 'flesh and blood' reality of what God has done. John gives us 'the bigger picture' of God's purpose in sending a savior. I like both birth stories; it is good that we hear them both at Christmas time.

John helps us not to be like the woman who pretended a child's need for a gift, even after he had grown up. John is clear that Christ is more than a baby, more than an itinerant preacher in Galilee....this Son of God is from the very beginning 'very God of very God'. This Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. This Word is the true light that we will be celebrating in the 12 days of Christmas and the season of Epiphany. I hope that people will keep the Christmas lights burning for a few more days, at least, as a witness that Christ is come, that the light of Christ will always stand against the darkness.

Today we celebrate with words both of Luke and John that God has broken into our darkness and shared in human flesh to reveal himself in Jesus Christ. God has walked with us, has participated in the disappointments, pain and struggles of earthly life. God has not forgotten us. Christmas gives us joy and hope in knowing we are not alone.

About a century ago, the mayor of Boston wanted to know more about the city slums...more than the newspapers or welfare workers could tell him. So he let his beard grow, put on a shabby suit, and wandered through the slums. He carried no money, and begged for a place to stay. At one boarding house they offered him a room in exchange for chopping a pile of wood. He struggled with the axe, unable to get the hang of splitting wood. A young man stopped him and said, 'Let me do that for you'. With his sure grip and strong arms he made short work of that woodpile. The mayor thanked the young man and gave him his card and said, 'Come down to city hall tomorrow--I'll give you a good job.' The young man felt sorry for the old man, thinking he had lost his mind as well as his money. A few days later, he thought it over and did show the card to the clerk at city hall. Lo and behold, he was welcomed into the mayor's office and was given the good job promised to him. The Boston paper covered the story with this headline: "The Biggest Social Stoop in History".

We know that headline exaggerates...the biggest social stoop in history was when the word became flesh to dwell among us. The biggest social stoop was God's great decision to come to us in Jesus Christ. We live in a time filled with God's presence and grace. It is like the mayor's business card handed to the young man. We have the Word--it has been given to us. We take that word on faith and act upon that Word in our lives. That's the bigger picture John gives us, bigger than a baby in a stable...bigger than angels and shepherds and wise men.

On our travels last summer we visited a Bavarian style village in Washington state. I remember as we walked into one of the shops, the sign on the door said: "Christmas spoken here". It reminded me that Christmas is not just a day or a season...it is the Word made flesh to dwell with us.

We receive that Word today....in scripture read and preached, in bread and wine broken and poured for us. The word made flesh to dwell among us, full of grace and truth.

Merry Christmas. May Christ dwell in you throughout the coming year. May his peace which passes all understanding keep us one in the Word made flesh. Amen.