

The Word Was Made Flesh

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Several years ago my husband's niece came to our family gathering over the holidays with her tongue pierced. She was sternly lectured about infection, and how unattractive it was. She responded, "At least it's not a tattoo!" I had to agree. Piercings can grow over. Tattoos are usually permanent, or painful to remove.

So are words. Words are usually permanent, and painful to remove. There are reasons we are warned not to confide through email. There are reasons why we kiss and weep over the letters of a loved one. And we tend to associate certain words with certain people. Like the game *Password*, we play word association. George Washington – cherry tree. Santa Claus – Christmas.

There are people in this world that are easy to describe in one word, as if it were tattooed on their forehead. Take my husband's Aunt Patti, may she rest in peace. I would tattoo the word late on her forehead, because she was always late to everything. We had to tell her the wrong time, usually 45 minutes earlier, so she would be only 10 minutes late. Or Pam, my friend from Seminary, her word would be joy. She is annoyingly joyful – when I first met her I was immediately suspicious of her. No one could be that happy, I thought. She would say, "I have so much joy in the Lord!" Right, I thought. You must have lived a very sheltered life. Nothing bad probably ever happened to you, I said to myself. I was wrong. Pam has had more than her share of troubles, yet she really does have deep joy. I have come to believe in her joy; I still don't understand it.

Now, of course, there is and was much more to Aunt Patti and my friend Pam than those words, just as there is more to George Washington and Santa Claus. But some people seem to embody certain words, as certainly as they are tattooed on their foreheads. Sometimes their associations are hard to shake off. Like a childhood nickname, some words stick around.

So here we are, after Christmas, kneeling down by the manger of the newborn baby, and there seems to be something on his forehead. A word, a name, can you see it? It is such a large tattoo for such a small baby.

Who would do such a thing? Who would label a little baby, so soon after being born? Who would put such expectations and burdens on such a new life?

Well, we would, and we do.

We are confronted by astounding words from John this morning. The word was made flesh. Who is the word? Jesus. Jesus is born. The word was made flesh and lived among us.

Jesus. Yes, this child in the manger is named Jesus. But like the name “George Washington”- that name packs a punch. He may be named Jesus, but the associations we have along with that name are not so clear-cut. The word was made flesh. Jesus is the word made flesh. So, what's the word?

John uses the Greek, *logos*, for word, which brings to mind the very act of creation. God created by speaking, “Let there be light.” God named the worlds into being. Naming is serious business in the Bible. God renamed Abram to Abraham, Sari, to Sarah. When God named something, God claimed it.

We follow this example. By naming, we are claiming. We name babies, pets, even property. By naming, we bring that which we name into reality. So, what we name this small baby is what we will be claiming about him. The word we choose, the name we decide on – is serious business.

So, what do we call this baby, this word made flesh? As we kneel down by the manger of this new baby, the voices are rising, and not all in agreement.

Some voices around the manger translate *logos* for God. God was made flesh and dwelt among us. Some would point to this verse and say, “Aha, this is proof that Jesus is God, and God is Jesus! The baby's name is God!”

Others would translate *logos* as “the glory of God” was made flesh and lived among us. Some would point to this verse and say, “Aha! This is proof that Jesus had some of God in him, but he was not God! The baby's name is Humanity!” And so on.

When I was a child, I had no problems with Jesus, he was more like a big brother. I certainly never thought of him as part of God, but more like a friendly ghost you could pray to. God was the scary one.

When I was older, it was the person of Jesus that troubled me. Was he really God? Is that what the incarnation is all about? When we sing, “word of flesh appearing” do we really mean God was in this little baby?

For many Christians it does. For just as many, it doesn't. Jesus has been named many things by many people. To many people he is a product of history, irrelevant to our times and lives. For some, he is the traditional savior, born and died to take our sins away. A perfect sacrifice means no mere man could do, so God came down at Christmas. For others, he is the supreme healer, the one that works miracles and heals our troubles. Others see him as that third person of the Trinity, God in flesh. Mystics name him Lover, experiencing a love that is sensual and somehow holy. Some see him as wise teacher and prophet, not God, but a person worth listening to, worth following. And some, some see him as the Great Avenger, the one who will ride in at the last moments of history, and fix it all up.

For me, as well as for some of you, I am guessing, Jesus is a mixture of all, some, or none of the above. I suppose that what we name Jesus tells us more about ourselves and our longings than it does about him.

Savior, teacher, king of the Jews, blasphemer, redeemer, prince of peace, demon possessed, healer. The problem with all these names is that we like to tattoo them on Jesus' forehead, make them permanent. Wars have been waged over what to name this small baby. Fires have been lit,

heretics burned, and thoughtful people excommunicated over just what this word that was made flesh was.

Just like us, Jesus is more than one name to one person. To name him one name only would be to miss him entirely. To name him only God would be to miss his humanity, to name him only savior would be to miss his teachings, to name him irrelevant would be to ignore his urgent call to justice.

But to not name him at all would be a tragedy. For to be a Christian means to claim Christ, in some way. Maybe not the same way that history has, or your family, or even your previous church has. But certainly, to name yourself "Christian" means at some point you must deal with the naming of this small baby, this baby that our faith is built around.

By naming the baby in the manger, you name his renewed presence into the world. By naming yourself "Christian" you are naming a new life, your new life, into existence. You become the word made flesh. Naming is serious business, even now.

On New Years' day, while most of the world will be celebrating the Feast of "I've had too many glasses of champagne" with the sacrament of Alka-Seltzer, some in the church will celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name. It is the day Jesus was named. When we as a church meet again, it will be for the Feast of Epiphany. We will begin our new year with stories of the baby, grown up, baptized, working miracles, and calling disciples. Calling them by name. Calling us by name.

What will you name him? My friend Pam names him Joy, for that is how she sees him, she experiences him. Another names him Healer, because of the profound healing she has experienced in her life.

I name him Wisdom, with a capital W, for I believe he is God's wisdom made flesh. I name him Teacher, for I believe he shows us the ways to live. I name him Revealer, because I believe that Jesus reveals God to us, and reveals the God in us that we sometimes refuse to see.

My names will not be your names. That is the wonder and brilliance of our progressive faith. But we name and share our names together. We make the names of Jesus flesh, for all to see. We become those names in the world, healer, teacher, wisdom, revealer, joy.

The word was made flesh, and lived among us. Name him, name the baby.