

“GOD WITH US”

CHRIST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

OCTOBER 18, 2015

Prayer- O God, in the beginning you spoke. And as you spoke, creation came into being. By your word, by your command, light dawned on the darkness, land formed on the seas, animals roamed and humankind was formed. In your good time, you spoke again, and Jesus, your own son became flesh and blood and dwelt among us. Today we ask you to speak. Bring us to a place where he may be born in our hearts. Bring us, as we are, into your great love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

John pointed him out and called, “This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word.”

¹We all live off his generous bounty,
gift after gift after gift.
We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving,
This endless knowing and understanding—
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.
No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.
This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made him plain as day.

John 1:14-18 (The Message)

There are many programs going around these days where you systematically read the Bible in a year, with large chunks of scripture every day. That sounds like a lot of work to me in a day and age when so few actually read the Bible, so as a guest preacher I thought I would give you a shortcut while your pastor is away- The Bible in 48 words

God made,
Adam bit
Noah arked,
Abram split
Joseph ruled,
Jacob fooled
Bush talked,
Moses balked
Pharaoh plagued,
People walked
Sea divided,
Tablets guided
Saul freaked,
David peeked
Prophets warmed,
Jesus born!!
God walked,
Love talked
Anger crucified,
Hope died
Love rose,
Spirit flamed
Word spread,
God remained.

Today's theological topic is "God with us", looked at particularly through a few verses in the first chapter of the Gospel according to John. I cherish this passage in the message version for its unique and faithful translation of verse 14-

"the word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood".

In the original language of the New Testament, the greek word Logos is translated into English as word. But Logos is more than simply speech, it is God in action creating, revealing and redeeming. For example, in Isaiah 40:8 we hear "the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever". In Isaiah 55:10-11 we hear- "as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not

return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it". God regularly and purposefully acts by his word.

The word also, and especially for Jews, means wisdom. For Jews, God's presence was in the Temple and enshrined in the Law and the Torah as wisdom.

For pagan philosophers, the Word (logos) was a principle of rationality, lying deep in the whole cosmos. They would have agreed with John's opening statement- in the beginning was the word, but not with his conclusions. Because for John, the word is a person, a human being sent from God, enfleshed in Jesus. God's glory dwelt, literally tabernacled, pitched his tent, in the flesh of Jesus. Or my favorite way of saying it- became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood!

What John is saying here, is that the real meaning of the incarnation, of God with us, is that Jesus came in our human flesh, as a real human person. One writer suggests that the idea of incarnation is actually threatening to us. It is not the way we prefer to think of God.

Give us a theophany, not the Incarnation. Give us God in a sermon. Give us God in a dream. Give us God in a cloud or a sunset or in a warmed-heart feeling. Give us God in a beautiful idea, or an abstract theological speculation. Give us God in tablets of stone or burning bush or in choirs of angels or in a fiery prophet, but not in a wailing newborn in a particular place, in a particular time, with particular parents, in a particular village because of a particular political edict.

Johns' word to us, after the angels have gone, is that whatever we think or feel about it, the real meaning of Christmas is that Jesus was born like one of us. God refused to stay in heaven, but came to be fully and completely human, born the same way any baby is born.

If you really stop and think about that, it is a comfort that God has come in Jesus to be like us. What we really need is a God who does not stay up there in the heavens, but a God who knows what it is like to be like us and to live with the things we have to deal with in this life. We need a God who knows what it is like to be disappointed, or weary, or lonely or even afraid.

Max Lucado says it well, “for 33 years he would feel everything you and I have ever felt. He felt weak. He grew weary. He was afraid of failure. He got colds. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired. And his head ached. To think of Jesus in such a light is- well, it seems almost irreverent, doesn’t it? It’s not something we like to do; it’s uncomfortable. It’s much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. Pretend he never snored or blew his nose, or hit his thumb with a hammer. He’s easier to stomach that way. There is something about keeping him divine that keeps him distant, packaged, and predictable. But don’t do it. For heaven’s sake don’t. Let him, be as human as he intended to be. Let him into the mire and muck of our world. For only if we let him in can he pull us out. (God Came Near, by Max Lucado)

I have a friend named Billy who spent some time in the mire and muck of prison, convicted of drug use charges. I didn’t know him then, but I got to know him a bit when he came to our church to work on his community service hours. John Knox church is a site where non-violent offenders can come and work off their court ordered volunteer time. Billy chose our church, I think, because of a letter he received in prison from one of our church members. The church member wrote him to say that he needed to get his life together and turn to Jesus. At first the letter made him angry, and then it made him sorry, and finally it made him determined to give his life to Jesus Christ. He showed up at our church door with 275 hours to burn, and we gave him all kinds of work to do. Washing windows and floors, cutting grass and shoveling snow, setting up Vacation Bible school and meetings, fixing broken things long neglected by our already over-worked volunteer custodians.

Billy was so grateful for the opportunity to work off his hours, and we were so grateful for the improvements around our facility. His faith grew by leaps and bounds- he joined the church and went on mission trips, he prayed for people, he joined a small group, he brought bikers for Jesus to our parking lot and he witnessed to Jesus Christ wherever he went. We eventually hired him full time and he still did great work, but he was often seen in the hallways counseling recovering addicts who had come to a 12 step program in our building. He drove leftovers from our church suppers to homeless shelters and he fixed things in the homes of our elderly. He mentored young people who came to work off their own community service hours, warning them to stay on the right track. Last year he portrayed Jesus in the church Vacation Bible School skit- perfect for his long hair and

lanky frame. He cried afterwards for how moved he was by the whole experience.

Billy loves Jesus and he knows God is with him wherever he goes. But eventually the addiction got the better of him and he messed up in a big way; we couldn't trust him anymore and he had to leave his employment with us. Once in awhile he comes to worship, and is hugged and loved and accepted, but I know he struggles mightily against addiction and fear. I still trust God to bring him back, no matter how unlikely that may seem at the moment. Because I know that God doesn't give up on any of us. God is with us in the highest points of our faith, and with us still in the mire of addictions and doubt.

The moment someone receives the Word made flesh and believes in the authority of Jesus, they enter into the family. They receive power to become children of God and power to then act on these words, so that the word might become flesh in their life. But it is not an easy road, and we need each other to stay strong and to turn back our fears.

Maybe you've heard the story about a little boy who was frightened one night during a great thunderstorm. He called out to his father from his bedroom and said, "Daddy, I'm scared. Come in here."

His dad, who had settled in for the night and wanted to go to sleep, told the little boy, "Son, it's all right. God is with you in that room right now. You're OK."

There was a moment of silence. Then the little boy shot back, "Dad, right now I need someone with skin on."

How often, in the midst of life's anxieties, both large and small, we need someone "with skin on" who can be God's presence with us and help us to be less afraid. Maybe you have been that person, sitting at the bedside of someone who is sick, praying in the sanctuary for a deep need in someone else's life, offering a meal, a hand on the shoulder, a word of encouragement, not even aware that you are, in that moment, the presence of God, with skin on.

The gospels records a struggle between those who acknowledge Jesus as the revealer of God and those who will not. The struggle will go on until the end of time. Not everyone with agree with the unique Christian claim that

God came to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and moved into the neighborhood. They can't trust what they can't see, and maybe their own neighborhoods have seen more darkness than light, more sorrow than joy. But what they can see is you and I, going to church, offering prayer, living grace filled lives, being more faithful and less fearful.

I live in a neighborhood on a major suburban thoroughfare. The old houses on our street, including mine, have large front porches with steps, fairly close to what was originally a dirt farm road and is now a paved street. When we first moved there, I walked past a lot of those porches with a stroller and a dog and maybe kid or two on a bike. Some neighbors waved and a few invited me up to the porch- kids, dog and all. After a few porch visits, I was offered a glass of water or iced tea and then as my kids started to play with theirs, I even made it into the front door. I left my children in their homes to play and they brought their children to me. Eventually we progressed to appetizers in the living room, then dinner at the dining room table, then standing in the kitchen with a bowl of soup and a pile of dirty dishes in the sink. That's when you know you're really friends! Today we have teenagers in and out of the house, our doors are always open and there is always room for one more plate at the table. God lives in our neighborhood because we see God living in the lives of our neighbors- children who cry and laugh, teenagers who succeed and fail, spouses who leave and come home, tragedies and triumphs shared.

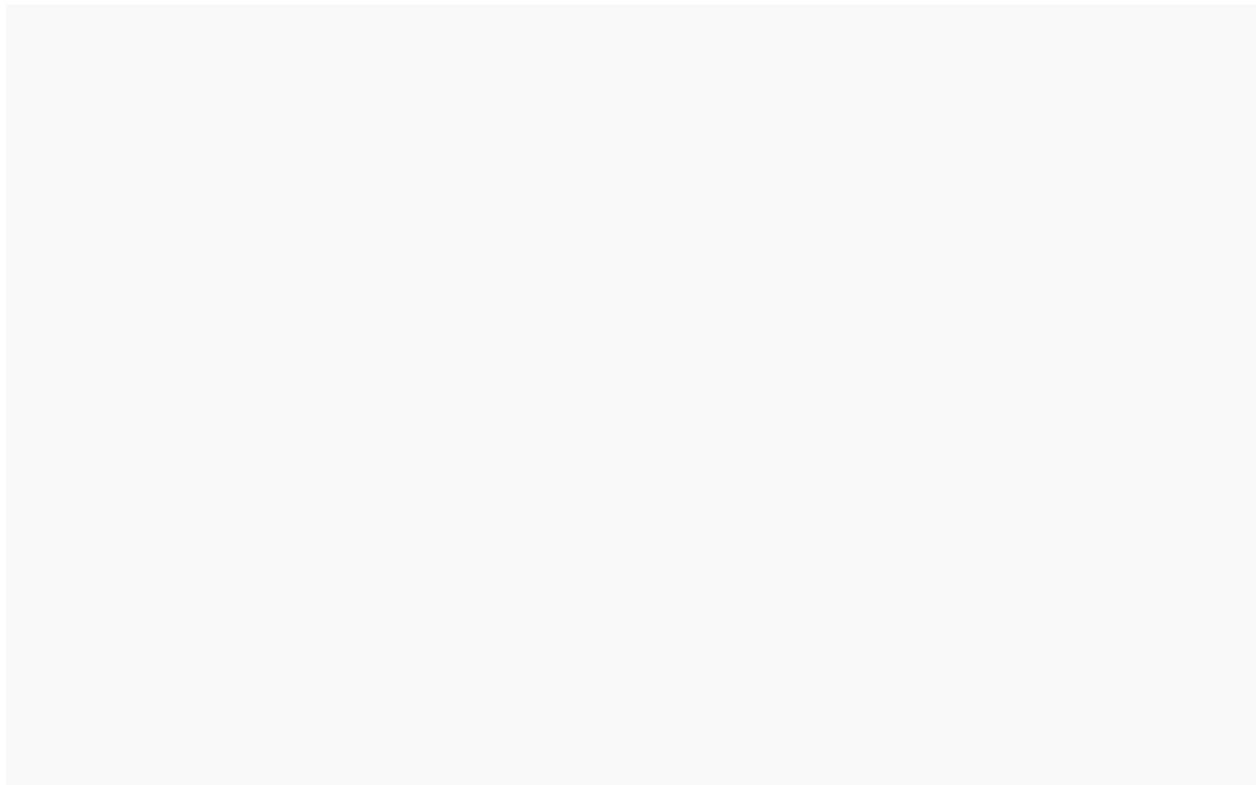
And that is my vision for the church at its best, when we live out the identity of God with us. Your church, like my own, is set back a bit from the road and we have to find ways to symbolically wave to neighbors driving or walking by without a front porch to help us. We have to find real ways to be welcoming and hospitable, offering a cup of cold water in the summer, a cup of hot coffee on a winter's day. And as people from the outside "check us out" to see if we are a safe place where they may bring their loved ones, we have to live out open doors and tables where there is always room for one more. Maybe some of you found your way here by eventually walking through the front door, formally becoming a member, then befriending others, trusting them and now you find yourself standing in this church

kitchen or other kitchens eating a bowl of soup with people who embody the presence of God for you, people who are God in the flesh for you.

God lives here, in your hearts, and in this sanctuary. Upstairs and down, inside and out, in the classrooms and the kitchen. Around you are people who will lift you in prayer through your trials and will serve you in your need and may be at your bedside for the last breath you draw in this world. God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, has moved into this neighborhood and this church. Because God is here among us, we invite others to come and see, to experience what we already know- that Jesus Christ will never leave us or forsake us, that he is God's love poured out in blood and flesh and tears for our sake, for our salvation, and for the sake of the world!

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

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- Call to Confession-
- For the truth of the Son, the truth that makes you free, the truth at the heart of the 95 theses which Luther nailed to the door at the Wittenburg church, is that we *are* sinners -- God's fallen, flailing, and confused children -- from birth to death. Sinners that no amount of indulgences or good works can ever redeem. Sinners so corroded by fear that only the very blood of the Son of God can cleanse them, so deeply stained by insecurity that only God alone could forgive them.
- But we are also those sinners for whom Christ died. We are those sinners, that is, who, dead to the law, are now free to love and serve our neighbor extravagantly, daring to care for the poor, to give witness to the gospel, to help our neighbor, and to share all that we have and are no matter what. For we are, finally, those justified sinners who, having died with Christ, will also rise again with him, to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

- Light of life, you came in flesh,
born into human pain and joy,
and gave us power to be your children.
Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us,
so that all of creation may sing new songs of gladness
and walk in the way of peace. Amen.

Here we stand, Lord,
The people you have redeemed.
Here we stand, Lord,
giving thanks to you for you are good.
We give thanks that your love lasts forever.
We thank you that you free those who are oppressed.

Here we stand knowing that it is you
We all can cry out to for help in times of trouble.
We know that you will not only deliver us but
That you will lead our way to where we need to go.

Here we stand by the living water
That you set flowing for all.
We drink freely from your waters
That gratifies everyone who is thirsty.
And we thank you that you also
Give plenty to eat for those who are hungry.

Here we stand with those who reformed the church so long ago
And with those who still are reforming the church today.
Here we stand witnesses to your good news for all.
Here we stand your servants, your followers, your children

- **Prayer of the Day**

You break the cycle of wars,
so we may be enriched by your peace;
you shatter the grip of violence,
so we may be freed from our fears;
you plant your words of hope deep within us,
carving on our hearts:
'you are mine.'
You give us the word we need,
so we might live in your grace,
God of Creation.

You freely become one of us,
so we could be liberated
from our addiction to sin;
you take us by the hand
to lead us out of our doubts;
you give us the words we need,
so we can continue to share
your good news of life,
Friend of the needy.

You pull us to safety
when sin's waters swirl around our feet;
you surround us with serenity
when doubts rattle our souls;
you give us words we need,
whenever we wander
onto the paths of trouble,
Spirit of Holiness.

God in Community, Holy in One,
you give us the words we need
to pray as Jesus has taught us, saying,
(*The Lord's Prayer*)

Call to Reconciliation

We can no longer flatter ourselves about how good we are. We do not need to make grandstand plays to get God's attention. We only need to confess our lives, as God makes good on the promises of grace and mercy. Join me as we ask God to reform us into God's children, praying together