

The Word Became This Flesh

Colleagues,

This is John 1 season. We sampled it on the Third Sunday of Advent (1:6-8, 29-28). The main course followed on Christmas Day (1:1-14). Where I do most of my work, a pesky saint has finally prevailed on me to tackle the Gospel of John in the Sunday morning Adult Education class. I consented with fear and trembling. John astonishes me. It annoys me too. In either case I find it requiring a heap of hard labor to follow what's going on, and after that to hear how God is speaking through it to me, or to the people God sends me to with a current item of good news for them. I'm much more at ease with Matthew and Mark, and to a lesser extent with Luke.

Be this as it may, John is ever rewarding, and at times surpassingly so. I've been learning that again these past few weeks, with lots of help from Raymond E. Brown, the late great Jesuit scholar whose two-volume commentary on John leaves one gasping at its comprehensiveness and erudition, to say nothing of its graciousness. I'm thinking here especially of the tone that Brown adopts toward the raft of other scholars he's in constant conversation with, among them some who seem to me to have said some spectacularly silly things. In this, Brown is a model for those of us who, fifty years after he wrote, are trapped in less polite days. Thus too does one's light so shine, as Matthew might put it (cf. Mt. 5:16). John would say it like this: thus too do we love each other as Christ has loved us all (cf. Jn. 13:34).

Here are a couple of other items I've picked up from Brown so far that others of you might have missed along the way as well:

1. The only occurrences in John of the word "grace"—*charisin*

Greek—are in the Prologue, 1:1-18. After that John's key word for God's attitude toward us is "love." This leads Brown to use "love" as the translation for *charisin* in his own rendering of the Prologue. Of even more interest is how he turns the phrase that others transmit as "grace and truth." It occurs twice, in 1:14 and 1:17. In both places Brown gives us "enduring love," as in "we have seen his glory...filled with enduring love." Behind that lies a supposition that John is using *charis* and *aletheia* (usually "truth") as equivalents for a pair of Old Testament Hebrew words that are often rendered in English as "steadfast love." It's an intriguing idea, even for this Lutheran who is quick to point out that God's truth is a sword with two edges, one of which is serrated. Still, Promise trumps Law, and of all the truth that presents itself in Christ to God's everlasting glory in Christ, that's the piece John drives us to grab hold of at last with a fierce determined faith. See the climactic episode with Thomas in chapter 20. So yes, methinks that Brown is onto something here. I pass it on for your mulling too.

2. Of equal interest is a key item that our usual English hides. In Greek, it's transparent. So too in Jerome's Latin, and to some extent (I think) in Luther's German. John famously starts "In the beginning was the Word..." The verb is a past tense, third person singular, of *eimi*, "I am." You got it, Name of God, heavily featured throughout John's Gospel, as in "...before Abraham was, I am" (8:58). [A new translation of the New Testament](#) hit the market in September. The person behind it, David Bentley Hart, argues that "the Word" is wholly inadequate for the task of conveying whatever first-century types were thinking about when they heard the Greek *logos*. His solution is to stick with the Greek. "In the origin was the Logos, and

the Logos was present with God, and the Logos was god;”—that’s how he does it, with an extended footnote to explain himself, not least when it comes to typography. I wonder if a simpler solution might be to throw “word” into small caps, after the convention followed by Old Testament translators when they bump into God’s proper name as Israel knew it: the Lord. Thus too in John 1: the Word. Why not?

But back to our story. The Word “was.” Through this Word all things “were made.” Here the verb *isegeneto*, a past tense of *ginomai*, and better rendered as “came to be,” or “happened.” (Homiletical sidebar: “No, you addled moderns, stuff doesn’t ‘just happen’; it happens always and only through the Word. Or to crib from Luther, ‘I believe that God is *still* creating me and all creatures....’”). Anyway. A few lines further John tackles the matter of the Baptist’s relation to the Word, and here’s where the English bungles it. “There was a man sent from God whose name was John” (NRSV and most others). Big oops. The verb is *egeneto*, a clear and vivid contrast to the unadorned “was” of the Word, verse 1. Here a man happens. A man comes to be. Said man, sent by God, happens *through* the Word like everything else except the Word, excepting too the God with whom the Word was and is and always will be. No wonder the Baptist will soon confess that he’s not worthy to unlace Jesus’ sandals (1:27).

And now the stunner: “The Word became—*egeneto*—flesh....” This is John’s terser equivalent of the self-emptying that Paul sings about in Philippians 2, using the same verb: “Not regarding equality with God a thing to be grasped, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, ‘happening’—*genomenos*—into human likeness.” In American slang, one calls this a huge come down. The Doer is suddenly done to. He Who Was is now another of the billions who merely come to be. The Word and the Baptist now share the same predicament. Paul’s image for the predicament is

slavery; and if he's thinking here with the same mind that spilled out Galatians, then he's describing the unhappy situation of a person bound by Law. Stuff happens to that person whether she likes it or not, and behind the stuff is the One who drives all happening.

John's image is even grimmer. Enfleshment. That's plainer English for "incarnation," a word I dodge these days in any conversation that doesn't involve a stuffy liturgist or theologian, and even then I'm chary of using it. The word has been ruined by many centuries of pious pictures showing that ever so clean and healthy crowd clustered around the glowing baby in the manger. That's not the mood John means to convey when he says the Word was bundled into *sarx-carnis* in Latin. Or in rock-bottom English, "meat," as a friend and colleague pointed out some weeks ago. My meat. Your meat. Dead meat, now walking, now not. Though even then, I think, we fail to grasp the appalling, wondrous scandal of the thing—its glory, as the Holy Spirit, working through John, would have us see.

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I took this scandal up last Monday in my Christmas Day sermon. I dare now to share it with you even though it begs for another several drafts to satisfy my own expectations of what a sermon needs to do. Still, there may be something here already that others find helpful. It also affords me a chance to introduce some of you to one Anton Lutz, a 2003 graduate of Valparaiso University and a winner, this year, of one of the university's Alumni Community Service awards. (I and others had nominated him for the Outstanding Young Alumnus award, but there it is.)

Anton is as sharp a lay theologian as Valparaiso has ever produced, I think. He's a doer too, or, more specifically, a fearless doer-in-Christ for the sake of the least and the lost,

and his doing is these days especially courageous. It was featured recently [in the Huffington Post](#). Anton uses Facebook as a tool for his work. One of his recent posts included the photo you'll read about it in the sermon. Oddly, I've seen photos by the tens of thousands that could have done what this one did. I saw all too many last May at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial. But why and how the penny drops when at last it does is another of those mysteries that defies explanation. That the Word became flesh is good and essential news also for the slow and stupid.

Anton could use your prayers. The lost and the least he's trying to rescue could use them even more. So could the folks who, in subsequent drafts, would get more mention in the sermon. I mean the agents and perpetrators of the evil that injures others so cruelly. Theirs too is the flesh the Word got draped in. To think of it stuns the mind. It pushes the meaning of grace-and-truth to the breaking point, or beyond.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Word Became *This* Flesh

A Christmas Day Sermon

+ In Nomine Jesu +

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth.” *–John 1:14*

Any more these words roll easily from the tongue. Too easily. That's what happens when you've been working on and off with a great text like this for a few decades. You learn it. You get

used to it. You stop probing it to see what lies inside. After a while the words don't astonish you anymore. They don't snatch your breath away.

Then comes something like the pictures I saw on Facebook last week. They were taken in the highland valleys I got to know as a missionary's kid in Papua New Guinea. I later roamed them as a young pastor in my first call. The photos showed up in the feed of a man my children's age who was also the son of a missionary. His dad was a doctor. Like me, the young man went to college in the U.S. and then went home to a place Americans aren't supposed to think of as home, though a few of us do. A very few. He's been working there for over a decade as a lay missionary, building airstrips, tutoring church workers, combatting an AIDS epidemic, and lately, leading a fight against sorcery. Or to put that more accurately, he's been challenging a surging belief in sorcery, and doing his best to rescue the victims of that belief.

The victims are almost all women. Tortured women. I mean that quite literally. Someone dies. Someone else claims that a witch was responsible. A culprit is identified. That person is seized. A crowd, composed mostly of men, tries to force a confession from her with fire and sharp steel.

The pictures I saw were of a woman this happened to. She was covered with burns and long, deep cuts.

The Word became flesh. This kind of flesh. Abused, mistreated flesh. Her flesh. Stupid me, I hadn't made that connection before.

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I don't mean to shock you this morning, or to ruin your Christmas. I mean only to underscore the gravity, the urgency,

the gasping wonder of the Christmas Gospel.

Babies, as a rule, are beautiful little creatures. I notice that every time I get to baptize one. It's easy to marvel at the perfection of tiny little fingers that itch to wrap themselves around a bigger one. "In the beginning was the Word," John writes. The writer to the Hebrews described him just now as "the exact imprint of God's very being." To see that imprint lodged in the form of a baby is not so hard. No wonder the phrase "The Word became flesh" has taken on a sweet and sentimental hue for lots of us. The world at large kind of likes it too.

All babies grow up, of course. Some grow up pretty. More don't. Even the pretty ones start to hanker at some point for the flesh that was, and is no more. The baby-soft skin, for example. People have raked in money by the gazillions peddling lotions that promise to restore that. Later the wrinkles set in as they're bound to do, and more gazillions get handed over to the Botox company and their crew of plastic surgeons to remedy these. More often than not the rest of us will laugh behind our hands at the results.

Fitness centers have sprouted like mushrooms in the last couple of decades. I don't frequent them. I get the impression driving by that they're packed with earnest young adults intent on honing their flesh into the finest form it can possibly assume. I've heard from those who do go inside that much of what you see there is a wee bit on the sad side. All the reps in the world won't get those bodies looking godlike.

Then there are those—too many of those—who never had a chance. From the start, the flesh rebelled. It got too roly-poly. The cute baby face turned plain. In teenage years the acne attacked. The emerging proportions of the adult body were somehow out of kilter. Later psoriasis set in. The heartbreak thereof, as they

continue to call it. Or at some point there were cancer cells.

All this is flesh. Mortal flesh, infected from the start with the seeds of corruption and death. And most of it is ugly, or at least not very pretty. You wouldn't realize that, of course, if all you knew of human flesh was what you saw in American TV shows or movies. The British, I think, are far, far better at telling the truth about this. When they pick actors for their shows they don't do pretty, they do real. Talent matters, looks not so much.

Anyway, the Word became flesh. The exact imprint of God's very being lodged itself in the stuff that really is, not the stuff we'd like it to be. When the Greeks sculpted images of their gods they crafted perfect human forms, all with faces that are very easy to look at. Since 99% of ancient Greeks didn't look that way, the message was plain. You aren't a god, or a child of God. You can't be. Get back to the mines, or galleys, or kitchens where the likes of you belong. Don't waste your time hoping.

Today's Christmas Gospel, first spoken by God, through St. John, to a Greek-speaking world, says quite the opposite. God made himself to look like you. Most all of you. Start hoping now, whoever you are. However you are. Whatever the shape your flesh is in.

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These words are spoken to that woman in the picture too, and anyone else who looks like her. There are all too many of them in our own country, our own city. They stumble day after endless day into the emergency room at Metro General. Or else the ambulances bring them there. Their flesh is damaged and broken. Not so much, I suspect, by fire and knives, as by bullets or needles. You might think that the story I told can't happen

here. We're not savages you say, as if, over there, they are. Truth is, over there they use cell phones too these days, and Facebook, and most all have been baptized or have some kind of long-standing Christian connection. But the darkness of sin hangs heavy on that land, as it does in ours. It addles human wits and even Christian wits. I have yet to hear of a Papua New Guinean attacking an elementary school with an automatic rifle. Pictures of the torn and damaged flesh that showed up recently in Las Vegas hospitals weren't displayed on the internet, or at least I hope they weren't. But if they had been, we'd have seen little difference between them and those photos of the tortured woman. If anything, the damage to bodies in Las Vegas was even worse.

The Word became flesh. Not pretty flesh, but torn and broken flesh. The exact image of God's very being is imprinted on a tortured man whose back and scalp are torn to shreds and who is hanging from nails as he gasps his final breath.

To see the glory of God at its most astonishing, that's where you look. Not in the manger, but at the cross. This is God's grace, that his only Son, the joy of the Father's heart, should be buried in flesh as ugly as the ugliest among us; as torn as the most torn, as broken as the most broken. That Christ should do this to rescue the ugly, to heal the torn, to redeem the broken; to raise the dead.

And this is God's truth this Christmas morning. His heart is set on that woman in the photo and on the millions like her the world over, even in America. The torn and broken flesh that littered the world in 2017, that will do so again in 2018—all of matters profoundly to God. He treasures the people he gave it too. He treasures you, and the flesh you occupy, whatever shape that flesh is in. He asks you to trust that he will care for it; that when it turns to dust or ashes as it must, he will not

allow his dear and treasured ones to be lost in its corruption. He makes a promise that even the greediest, most unscrupulous advertiser wouldn't dare to peddle. He will raise the dead. He will drape his dear ones in new flesh, in bodies that befit their dignity as daughters and sons of God Most High.

All this he will do in honor of the One that you and I are gathered this morning to worship and adore. We call him Jesus, the name God picked. "The Lord saves"—that's what the name means.

The Lord saves us from sin. The Lord saves us from death. The Lord saves us from the evil that others do, and others from the evil that we do to them. The Lord saves the ugly, the withered, the mortally ill. The Lord saves the broken, the torn, the abused, the addicted. The Lord saves the ones that others scorn and forget. The Lord saves that woman in the photo. The Lord saves you.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +