

**“MADE FLESH”**

(Advent 4)

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John 1:1-14 (p. 1027)

Imagine our lovely Christmas Eve candlelight service drawing to a close. After the congregation finishes singing “Silent Night” the pastor intones the familiar benediction, “Season’s Greetings!” How would you feel if I were to do that? Wouldn’t it seem incongruous – not to mention inane? There has been quite a flap in the media in recent weeks about the political incorrectness of saying “Merry Christmas” rather than the less offensive and obviously more inclusive “Seasons Greetings.” As far as I’m concerned, you can say anything you want. It’s a free country.

But I’ll have to admit that it would trouble me if I knew you were a Christian and you wished me “Happy Holidays” or “Season’s Greetings” out of some misguided sense of propriety – for fear that saying “Merry Christmas” might seem too exclusive. Well excuse me... Christmas is exclusive. It’s the celebration of a singular event that, by definition, excludes all others. And as I think about it, the reason I’d be upset is because Christmas isn’t about you and me or how happy we’re supposed to be. Christmas is the celebration of the arrival of a very real person named Jesus. Now, that may seem so obvious that it hardly warrants comment. But if the proper focus of Christmas is on a person, above all else, then I think we would do well to consider what that means.

What does it mean to say that the focus of Christmas is on a real person named Jesus? Well, for one thing it means that our faith and hope and joy aren’t just good feelings. It means they are anchored to an actual event in human history. It doesn’t matter if you’re talking about Martin Luther or Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa. When you’re dealing with a real person, you have to deal with the specific time and place in which that person lived.

It’s a different story when it comes to made-up people. It’s easy to transpose a fictitious character from one time and place to another. For example, when the Superman comics first came out in the 1930s, this miracle child was purported to have landed somewhere in Kansas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. So by the time of the Great Depression (a time when people needed heroes) the Man of Steel had grown to adulthood and could save the day. But when the full-length movie of Superman came out in 1978, the scriptwriters were obliged to time the baby’s arrival from Krypton in the 1950s so he would be an adult in the 1970s and could chase errant nuclear missiles.

With fictitious characters it doesn't matter when they supposedly lived. Whatever ideals or values the character stands for would probably fit most any time. But that's not true with real people. You can't re-tell the story of Martin Luther and make him a 21<sup>st</sup> Century figure. He has to stay in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, otherwise there's no story to tell. It's the same with Christmas: what we are celebrating has a definite spot in the chronology of this planet. The story of Jesus is not some eternal truth or symbolic story that would have meaning whether or not it ever really happened. Jesus is too real for that.

But Christmas means more than that. If Christmas is about a real person in history, it also means that you and I can know that Person. Everyone you've ever met is a wonderfully complex, distinct individual. Now, we all know that what goes into our liking or disliking or loving a person is never just one thing. Our assessments of people are based on all sorts of complex, inter-related characteristics. But regardless of how you may react to a particular person, once you know that person, there is no mistaking him or her. Each of us has a distinct personality. People are like snowflakes – no two alike.

Christmas is about a person. Jesus is a certain Someone. He's not the generic spirit of kindness and generosity. He's not some contagious essence you can "catch" the way old man Scrooge caught the "Christmas spirit" in Dickens' story. Jesus is not some community ambiance that can make the Grinch's heart grow five times bigger. He's a person.

If someone asked me, "*What was your mother like?*" I wouldn't say, "*Ah, my mother. Well, whenever I think of her, I'm immediately led to reflect on the true essence of the maternal spirit.*" No! I'd get very specific. I'd talk about the gentleness in her eyes – about the way she would listen carefully before answering – about the joy she found in her children. I wouldn't talk about motherhood – I'd talk about my Mom!

That's the way we talk whenever there is a real person who's the focus of our attention. And if you really know someone, you would never confuse him or her with anyone else – well, most of the time, in any case. Of course some of us have had the experience of walking up behind someone we were just sure was Jane. So we tapped her on the shoulder only to then have to say, "*Oops, sorry. Thought you were someone else.*" That happens.

But that kind of mistake would never happen after spending an hour chatting with Jane over coffee. Unless you're a few pine nuts short of a good pesto, you would not, half-way through a coffee date, suddenly have to say to your good friend, "*Oh, sorry. Here we've been talking for an hour, and all along I thought you were somebody else!*" No, when you know someone, there is no mistaking him or her for anyone else – past, present, or future. And the more you know someone, the less he or she seems like anyone else. It's true of Jesus.

Christmas is the celebration of a person – a singular, blessedly irreplaceable Somebody. And in our Gospel lesson John reminds us that this Somebody is God’s Son – the Word through whom everything was made – the very light of life. And John’s unique way of telling the story of the nativity was to say that the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The eternal Son of God became a particular human person who was given the name Jesus. Christmas is not about an atmosphere or a spirit or an essence. It is about a person who is every bit as real and alive as anyone in this place.

And that leads me to one last thought. If the heart of Christmas is a real person named Jesus, then you and I matter desperately to him. If Jesus is not real and alive, then we might as well abdicate our position and join ranks with all those politically correct secularizers who want to turn this season into a vacuous celebration of feeling good about ourselves. If the only thing we are gathered around in this season is an idea – a spirit – a symbol – then excuse me, but it’s hard for me to see how that makes any real difference. You can spend your entire life thinking about the idea of love. But could a concept ever come remotely close to what it is like to be loved by another person? Ideas can only take you so far, at least if you are a real flesh-and-blood human being.

In one of his Christmas sermons, Thomas Long talked about his leading worship seminars throughout the country. He said that he often meets people whose primary complaint about worship has nothing to do with modern music or new hymnals or bad sermons. Some people, he said, complain that what bugs them the most about services of worship are the announcements.

I can understand that. I suspect that what most of us want to get out of a church service is inspiration. And so perhaps one week you’ve just finished a rousing rendition of *Holy! Holy! Holy!* The organist was playing at glorious full throttle, the choir’s descant was just superb, and you felt as though you were winging your way into the very precincts of heaven. Then the pastor announced, “*Let’s remember to pray for Sister Beatrice who’s back in the hospital with another intestinal blockage.*” You know, a *non sequitur* like that can spoil the mood in a heartbeat.

But then Dr. Long pointed out that Sister Beatrice and *Holy! Holy! Holy!* really do belong together – that is, if it’s true that the Word was made flesh. If Jesus were only a symbol, if he’s nothing more than a certain way of experiencing life, maybe it would be enough if worship were mostly about atmosphere. But if the Son of God is a real person who let himself get incarnated into this world of bad digestion and committee meetings and all the other things that seem so mundane, then that means the mundane must be very important to him.

God so loved the world that he sent Someone into it. The Bible does not tell us that God so loved the world that he lifted that world up into heaven where all

the mundane details of life would evaporate the way the morning dew burns off the lawn once the sun comes up. No, God so loved the world that he sent a real person to this very real place we call home. The gospel says the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Christmas is our way of celebrating the presence of a real, definite, unmistakable, irreplaceable person who understands intimately what we have to deal with, day in and day out. He came to us to be born and live and die and rise again for us because he loves us that much.

As hackneyed as the phrase may have become, Jesus is the reason for the season. Christmas is about a real person. Everything hangs on that one fact. I say that because every last one of us needs Someone we can recognize and ultimately trust to take us into the future that he himself has already secured for us. We need a real Someone to call us by name in a way that we could never mistake for anyone else's voice. So my prayer for you this holy season is that you will be able to see beyond everything that would make of Christmas a generic sentiment rather than a personal presence, that you will recognize him when he calls you by name, and that you will have a profoundly Merry Christmas.

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