

never alone, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” (John 1:14)

This means that there is no mess in which God will not go to meet us. It means that we cannot sink too low for God. Again, you more than anyone else may see the irony of this clearly being considered even the greatest in the world was not enough to fill your life. But you are no different from any of us. We are all reaching and groping for something just beyond our grasp. And because it exceeds our reach, we will sometimes take whatever we can lay hold of.

Nothing self-won gets us closer to the desire of our heart, nothing achieved through our own talent or righteousness or ability plants at God’s side, the very place where we were made to be.

It is very possible that you feel alone now in your mess. You are not. Jesus Christ moved into your neighborhood a long time ago and He is knocking on your door, maybe now more than ever. He has promised that if you will only open the door, He will come in and be your eternal friend. To put it in your lingo—it’s a chip shot.

Merry Christmas, Tiger. Believe it or not the best gift of all, the simple gift you have sought your whole life, with more energy, effort and expense than most, is under your tree.

When Jesus Christ moved into our neighborhood, three wise men, traveling kings, a couple years later, brought him some gifts—after all that is polite thing to do. And so, as I am sure most of you know, they brought him three simple gifts--gold for a king, frankincense (burned during prayers) for a priest, and myrrh (used to anoint the bodies of the dead) for a martyr.

There is a tradition in the South that when someone moves into a neighborhood that they organize what they call a pounding. The person organizing the pounding hands out brown paper sacks, lunch bag size, and asked people to put a pound of something in it to give to the new neighbor. They usually give a pound of sugar or flour or hamburger or bacon.

To welcome Jesus into your neighborhood, what will put in your sack? What gift from your heart is suitable for the Word became flesh, the King, the Priest, the Martyr. A pound of pride? A pound of prayer? A pound of pleasure?

Jesus also said, “**As you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it also to me.**” (Matthew 25:40) Who in your neighborhood, wherever you may be, could use a pound of patience? A pound of love? A pound of grace? A pound of being treated like a human being?

Christmas is easy. Its about welcoming Jesus into neighborhood. It is the flesh that makes it hard.

Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* found in the *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, Phillip

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Each person in the congregation was handed small, brown paper sacks, containing one of four Bible verses praising and proclaiming the incarnation of the Word: Galatians 4:4-7, Philipians 2:5-8, Hebrews 4:14-16, Isaiah 9:2, 6.

“Flesh”

Reverend Eric Laverentz

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#3 in a Series of 5

Text: John 1:14-18

Simple Savior

The flesh is messy. But Christmas is simple. Would you pray with me please?

Triune God we praise you for the miracle of your Word becoming flesh. You have honored us by becoming human so that we might be placed at your side. Exercise your sovereignty this morning Father so that we might hear your Word and hear it clearly Transform our flesh Lord so that we may be brought into obedience with your Word. We ask all this in the name of our Savior Jesus and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

It came to me this last week that in all our discussion about keeping Christmas simple over the last few weeks, that the first Christmas—the one that started it all, was probably anything but simple. A baby born away from home—amongst total strangers forced to travel; alone, away from loved ones and familiar sights, probably penniless and poor, and with nowhere to stay, let alone have a baby. It was three years ago Christmas Eve that Jen and I traveled from Dayton, OH to Kansas City. We had a dog and a cat and she was about four months pregnant. And that was arduous enough. Mary and Joseph would have traveled 80 miles as the crow flies, but probably their journey would have been longer and taken at least a couple of weeks because they would have avoided Samaria. Their trip would have taken them across the Jordan River into the country of Jordan and then back across the river and up some steep hills to get to Bethlehem. And I am sure giving birth to a baby in a cattle stall and having smelly shepherd strangers arrive to pay homage to your newborn son sounds anything but simple. And as you may know Joseph and Mary and Jesus had to flee the country and live in Egypt for a while to avoid King Herod who wanted to have the baby Jesus killed.

Not very simple. Are we wrong here?

The flesh is complicated. The flesh is messy and Jesus enters into our mess and makes it simple.

Christmas can be messy. Beautifully wrapped gifts and presents under the tree become empty boxes and bags and paper, strewn ankle high around the room. Standing in line with receipts and coupons and lists, trying to keep your child from laying on the floor made filthy from boots trudging in parking lot sludge. Drive around the neighborhood on, or after, Christmas and look at all the discarded boxes, black trash bags full of discarded wrapping paper. Of course, there is the tree; the very center of the joy on Christmas morning, now sad and discarded, sagging as the melted dirty snow runs through the lifeless branches. It’s a mess.

John was a simple fisherman and so he knew a thing or two about cleaning up

messes. Actually, his life was something of a mess. His father wanted he and his brother to sit on Jesus' right and left hand. He was no favorite of the government. He asked Jesus if they should call down fire on a Samaritan village. John was exiled on a small 13 square mile island in Aegean Sea, placed there late in life by the Emperor Domitian for preaching the Gospel. Legend has it he also survived being boiled in oil as punishment. So, you see, John too had some complications in life.

However, for John — Christmas was simple.

John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Of course we said a few weeks ago exactly who the Word is— **the governing power of the universe, the controlling force who holds it all together, who hangs the stars and spins the planets, animates your beating heart and holds in place the protons and neutrons and electrons of every atom.**

Colossians 1:16-17 tells us exactly what the Word is, **“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”**

John teaches us Who the Word is:

John 1:17 “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

Jesus Christ—the Word of God.

Jesus Christ—son of Mary.

Jesus Christ—born of water and blood.

Jesus Christ—who spent his first night on the Earth he made in a cattle stall.

Jesus Christ—the bread of life who was laid in a cattle trough.

Jesus Christ—the Lord lived as a peasant in a backwater country, a vassal under an Emperor who claimed he was god.

Jesus Christ—the author of justice, convicted by a kangaroo court, and killed as a criminal on a cross.

When I preached on the Word a few weeks ago, it was hard for me then to not rush ahead to this sermon, to talk about the miracle, the world-changing, history-altering, cosmos shaking event of the Word becoming flesh.

Hebrews 2:17 “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect.”

1 Timothy 2:5, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ.”

Galatians 4:4-7 “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son

through what could only be called a nightmare. I finally found Jimmy in a back bedroom. He was surprised to see me—and I grabbed him by the arm and we went back outside into the light of day. “Don’t ever...make me do that again!” I said.

I went in there because I had a lot invested in Jimmy. But I also did not go into that hellish house alone. In fact, looking back, it was a mismatch. I brought with me the governing power of the universe, the controlling force who holds it all together, who spoke into the darkness and created the light, who separated the waters from the dry land and hung the moon the sun and stars in the sky. It was not me who should have feared, the evil who dwelt in the deep darkness of that house. It was the evil who should have feared Christ in me because He had just moved into their neighborhood. Truth be known, however, Jesus was already there long before I arrived—that’s what it really means to say the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. There is not a single hellish nightmare into which you will journey where you will not already find Jesus Christ waiting there for you.

Where is your neighborhood? Is it messy? Is it complicated? Are you alone? Do you have strangers for friends? Are you broke? Are you broken hearted? Is your spirit broken? Has it, whatever it is, just not happened yet for you?

Jesus has moved into your neighborhood.

Last week I decided to write a letter to let someone know, someone who I think is headed for a difficult Christmas that Jesus had moved into their neighborhood. I would like to read it to you.

Dear Tiger,

I cannot imagine how it feels to have your life turned into a late night show punch line, to have your secret sins and faults put on full display; a very public mess. Every one of us lives with dark shadows which if they were exposed to the light of day would simply wilt us. A songwriter wrote over 3000 years ago, “If you, O Lord, marked our iniquities, who could stand?” The answer is none of us. This is not to minimize our sin and shortcomings. It is to put our great, common need in perspective.

As you live with the almost daily humiliating revelations, process your new reality, and most importantly try to rebuild your life—you may wonder how this all happened. Competition has been the center of your life, your great passion—and here is one contest you simply will not win. You, like everyone else, have been beaten. Unlike nearly everyone else your defeat is bold face headline.

How you respond to this defeat will define your life for all eternity—infinitely more than breaking Jack Nicklaus’ record for major wins or being voted the athlete of the decade.

Victory, I am told, can be surprisingly and dreadfully lonely—but defeat, I know, is lonelier. Yet you are not alone. 2,000 years ago a man who was exiled in solitude to an island in the Aegean Sea wrote that we are

**Remember the day
I set you free
I told you
You could always count on me
From that day on I made a vow
I'll be there when you want me
Some way, some how
'Cause baby,
There ain't no mountain high enough
Ain't no valley low enough
Ain't no river wide enough
To keep me from getting to you**

Jesus' vow, the vow that we could always count on him, was made when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. The great Church father Athanasius said, **"God became one with man so that man might be one with God."** That simple truth is why we celebrate. That is why on Christmas Eve it seems that heaven bows so low. That is why during this time hope seems to spring eternal from the breast. The Word of God has become flesh and dwelt among us.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message* translates this passage to say, *"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood."*

Where is your neighborhood?

I have mentioned that I spent a couple of years working in the inner city of Trenton, New Jersey. Trenton, when I was there, was regarded as one of the worst cities in America—a real messy place.

I worked in a Christian school for kids thrown out of the public schools. Some time after I began working there we became aware of a crack house that was operating down the street from the school. We strictly charged the kids to go nowhere near it. In fact if they had to walk past it, we instructed them, they had to go to the other side of the street.

One day as we were walking back from recess in the park, one of the boys a burly kid named Jimmy, started shouting at someone across the street. "That's my cousin," he said. And he is wearing my sunglasses. Jimmy tore off across the street and when his cousin turned to walk into the crack house Jimmy followed him.

I was terrified. Jimmy was a good kid who battled depression...and now I saw him go into a place literally synonymous with hell. I stood there limping between two opinions—marching into a place from which I was at least as likely to emerge rolled up in an area rug as I was to walk out on my own two feet— or leaving Jimmy to his fate.

Before my brain even knew what I was doing, my legs were carrying me across the street, up the stairs and into the house. I went from room to room, sprinting

into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

Christmas is simple.

The Word became human and humanity became God. The Word endured shame so that we might know glory. The Word suffered pain so that we might experience pleasure. The Word became sin so that we might achieve righteousness. The Word became corruptible flesh so that we might become incorruptible.

Christmas is simple.

From the fullness of the Word we have received grace over and against grace, more grace than we could possibly comprehend—more grace than we could use in a thousand lifetimes.

Christmas is simple.

Your sins have been forgiven. The penalty has been paid. And more than that, their record has been expunged from history. They have been taken and nailed to the cross, cast into oblivion, stripped of their power over your life.

Christmas is simple.

Because the Word has become flesh we have seen God, God has been made known to this world, and more than that we have been brought next to His side. And because we have been brought close to the Author of Life, we will know life and life eternal.

Christmas is simple. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory.

Now the skeptic may say, "Glory?" Where is glory in a cattle stall? Where is there glory in being born of water and blood to a scared teenage girl? Where is the glory of the cross?

If God's glory is in a cattle stall, His glory can be in our home.

If God's glory is in a manger, His glory can be in the lunchroom at work.

If God's glory is on the cross, His glory can be wherever we struggle and strain.

If God's glory is in the flesh, His glory can be in you—wherever you choose to dwell.

There is no place you can go. No depth to which you can sink. No sin which can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is simple.

Let me drop a little Motown on you this morning. Marvin Gaye and Tami Terrell were the first to sing a song which talked about his love, but when I hear it, I cannot help think of Jesus' love for us: