

John 1:1-14: **Unfolding a Mystery**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY

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Most every December since childhood I've participated in a Service of Lessons and Carols. This lovely Christmas tradition started about 140 years ago at the church in Truro, in the southwest of England. At the end of World War I the chapel at King's College, Cambridge began an annual Service of Lessons and Carols. This very morning you may have heard the popular BBC broadcast from King's College. And here we are experiencing our own version of Lessons and Carols.

These services offer a sequence of scripture passages that trace God's promise and then fulfillment of redemption — liberation for this world which God so loves. The readings are interspersed with carols and anthems that illuminate the story of God's loving purposes.

The final reading in a Lessons and Carols service is traditionally this one from John chapter 1, and the bulletin often describes the text like this: "St. John unfolds the great mystery of the Incarnation."

By the time John's gospel was written, the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were being shared among the early church communities. So likely the writer of John was aware of those birth stories in Matthew and Luke. You know:

angels and dreams and Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem
and Jesus born in a space shared with animals and then shepherds and later the magi
and angry King Herod and Jesus' family becoming refugees in Egypt.

Those are the Christmas stories we're familiar with.

Those nativity stories tell us what happened. John wants to tell us what it means.¹ So he begins his gospel by telling the backstory. John writes this prologue that sweeps way back to...the beginning of time, back before creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John wants us to know that the person who became the human Jesus actually existed long before that first Christmas. That same person was the Word of God, and was with God, and was God, and took part in the creation of everything that is.

So already we're deep into mystery.

There's a popular and persistent notion that God exists as pure spirit and that bodies are impure. This gospel word explodes all that. It offers us instead a better and more provocative mystery: that "eternal Spirit became mortal flesh at a particular time and place in human history."²

¹ Noted by Lamar Williamson in *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word*. p. 7.

² *Ibid.* p. 6.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's great novel *The Lord of the Rings*, the elves are a race of mysterious beings who are blessed with immortality. The elf Arwen finds her soulmate in a human named Aragorn. He loves her too, but for them to be together she cannot keep her immortal distance. Though Aragorn tries to leave her free to live forever, out of love Arwen tells him, "I choose a mortal life."

"The Word became flesh and made his home among us." That's God saying, "I choose a mortal life."

I was five years old when my dad suffered his first heart attack. A second one came a few years later. While Dad remained a driven, passionate musician and professor, those medical events slowed him. Heart trouble forced Dad to confront his human vulnerability, his mortality. And by the time I was old enough to start thinking theologically, I found my dad captivated by the Incarnation. As he struggled with his own limitations, Dad grew to love this word from John, and he found it amazing that God chose to live a fully human life.

Incarnation is a fancy theological word that means to be embodied. You and I and all humans know what incarnation is because we live it every day. And John tells us that God doesn't just observe bodily life from afar. In Jesus God chooses incarnation for God's own self. Hunger, tears, passion, hugs, aches, exhaustion and rest, death — those bodily experiences are real for God too. Jesus' birth means that even to God — especially to God — bodies themselves are precious. The first miracle that Jesus does in the Gospel of John is turning water into wine to delight the bodies of wedding guests.

As my dad used to say, "Matter matters to God." That includes the difficult parts of physical life. Some here among us are facing surgery, or recovering from it. Some of us know chronic illness or addiction or gender dysphoria or the struggle of living with pain. Some of us face the fragility of aging. Some of us have lost parents or partners or loved ones. Some of us fight with our own bodies.

The presence and touch of Jesus Christ in this world blesses all of those human experiences with holy love and with divine tenderness. Are you able to perceive your body as sacred, as something graced and fully honored by God? Jesus' arrival brings God's loving presence straight into the heart of what it means to have a body.

God becoming flesh teaches us that every body is loved, and that no bodies are disposable. Yet some bodies live more vulnerably than others. Some bodies in our country and around the world have known violence or persecution or starvation or bitter cold. Into this dangerous, unpredictable world the Word of God comes to live a human life, setting aside any divine superpowers that could make him invulnerable, invincible. In fact Jesus reveals exactly the opposite about God — that God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

The wonderful young writer Rachel Held Evans worked out her evolving Christian faith in public — through her books, speaking engagements, and lots of conversations about how to be faithful in the 21st century. Rachel consistently prodded the church to ask, “Which people, which bodies, are not being cared for, and why aren’t we loving them like Jesus does?” Because being in community with Christ means standing in solidarity with all vulnerable bodies.

Then Rachel’s own life was suddenly cut short at age 37 due to complications from a strange infection. Rachel and her family confronted how quickly and randomly her light could be put out.

Yet still her words bear witness to the light of Christ. A couple Decembers before she died Rachel Held Evans wrote a blog post about the Christmas story. Thinking of so many bodies in our world who are undervalued and who suffer injustice, Rachel wrote that the way Jesus is born reveals that

...God has indeed chosen sides.

And it’s not with the powerful, but the humble.

It’s not with the rich, but with the poor.

It’s not with the occupying force, but with people on the margins.

It’s not with narcissistic kings, but with an unwed, unbelieved teenage girl entrusted with the holy task of birthing, nursing, and nurturing God.

This is the stunning claim of the incarnation:

God has made a home among the very people the world casts aside.³

As Rachel admitted, that’s an unsentimental perspective on Christmas. I think the writer of John’s gospel would approve. The eternal, creative Word of God shows up helpless and human and makes his home among the humblest of us. And that child’s life will radiate grace and truth and God’s own self.

What brings you here tonight?

Captivated by mystery?

Family tradition?

Singing Christmas carols?

Reconnecting with friends?

Seeing the church in candlelight?

Pleasing your mother?

Those are all right answers, and so is your own, whatever it may be. Whatever brings us here, we sit together as a community of warm, beloved bodies and we hear proclaimed “The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world.” God’s divine light has been set loose in our broken world, and it shines on everyone. That means you.

Good news shines forth this night: In Jesus, God takes on human life, and in return God blesses human bodies *here and now* with Christ’s light and life and grace and truth.

³ Held Evans, Rachel. Blog post: “Mary, the Magnificat, and an Unsentimental Advent.” 5 December 2017. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/unsentimental-advent>

[at 9:00 service: As we light candles later, try looking into the face of your neighbor because the light of Christ illuminates that person. Pay attention to the next stranger you meet because the light of Christ has shone on that person.]

May that holy mystery keep unfolding itself in our hearts. Merry Christmas, dear people.

In the name of the Word who always was,
the Word become flesh,
and the Word still speaking.