

THIS WHOLE THING IS ODD, RIGHT?

JOHN 1:1-14

DECEMBER 28, 2025

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

Our text this morning comes from John, chapter 1, verses 1-14.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

*This is the word of the Lord, **thanks be to God.***

If you were tasked with telling the story of Jesus, where would you begin? Perhaps in the manger? Or with the angels? Or, like Luke and Matthew, with a good ole family tree?

Over the course of this Advent season we've toyed with a few starting points. Ben, ever the disruptor, kicked us off in the future, with Matthew's startling depiction of the fall of the temple. He later explored Matthew's genealogy. Nick invited us to overhear the conversation between the angel and Joseph and the children proclaimed their Glorias from the angelic realm, practicing the song they would teach the shepherds.

Where would you begin? The shining star, the triumphant song of Mary, the magi? Each discloses something about this remarkable child, the one anointed "Messiah" and called God-with-us. Each can teach us something too: the nearness of God, the disruptive presence of the chosen one, the cleansing light that will not be snuffed out.

The author of the Gospel of John, writing toward the end of the first century, forgoes all of that. He surely knows the stories of Jesus' infancy, but he chooses the way back as his

starting point: back before the beginning, back to the unthinkable relationship of the Godhead.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God...

John's poetry flows with ease, betraying its complex affirmations.
and the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

The author of John, assuming that Jesus' incarnation tells us something about who we are and what this life is about, begins the story of Jesus with God's eternal being and God's unflinching purposes.

Not a bad place to start, but an odd one. The Evangelist begins his telling of the good news with common-nouns-made-complex, ideas so familiar that I fear we've lost a sense of just how strange and wondrous John's beginning really is.

Words and flesh. God, a child.

Back in Columbia my childhood bedroom prominently featured a cross-stitch announcing my birth. Alongside my name and the details of the day was a rhyming aphorism, "Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of." Lovely, isn't it?

Sometime during my teenage years that cross-stitch was moved to a less prominent spot. In its place, directly above my bed, a new cross-stitch appeared. This one had a more a more direct observation, stitched between two dancing court-jesters: "better to remain silent and appear a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

I'd leave that without comment but this is a sermon and that would undermine both my point and my being. True to self, I didn't take the dancing proverb personally (or to heart). Then as now, I had things to say, and whether I appeared a fool or not, I was determined to remove all doubt.

I love to talk (y'all are surprised, no?), and as Jen will confirm. I occasionally love to hear myself talk But it's not just talking that intrigues me. I like *words*. I like that idea that just the right word can help us make sense of our experience, affirm our feelings toward one another, or describe our current moment.

But even I have to admit that the world's gotten a little loud these days. Between the pundits and the deep fakes, the emails and the tweets, the texts, the barrage of advertisements, and the social media shouting matches, it seems like *words* have lost their meanings and we have lost touch with reality.

We consume language like a buffet: grabbing what we want, making whatever meaning we want, and grazing over challenging ideas. We create a world of meanings and ideas that suits *our* needs and *our* narratives, one that justifies *our* viewpoints and *our* ends.

We long for the silent nights of yore but the truth is that it would have been loud then too, back in Bethlehem at the turn of the millennia. Rome exercised its authority by marshaling military power to count native borns. Symbols of the Empire meant to threaten outsiders and quell dissenters rose up in every outpost. The emperor compelled devotion. Then as now money bought access and too many folks found the Pax Romana maintained at the cost of their well being. The animals brayed and bayed.

We think of our moment as extraordinary. Perhaps it is, but it's also nothing new. The world spits out its words endlessly. Ever consumers, we take what serves our needs and ignore the rest. Words weaponized and a world at a stubborn impasse, lost to its purposes, ignorant of its beginnings.

How striking then, to read in John's prologue, over the noise of Rome, that God's story is the story of *the Word*. Amidst our empty, meaningless sloganeering, in stark contrast to death-dealing, humanity denying slander, God is revealed to us as the ever-calling, life-affirming Word.

To counter our words, our self-justification and ignorance, God comes to us as *the Word*. That's John's starting point.

Give me a scroll in the year 90 and ask me to tell you the story of Jesus Christ. I guarantee I wouldn't have started with a Word. This court-jester would've chosen something flashier or more awe-inducing: perhaps the Power or the Avenger... something concrete to put in my back pocket and wield when I need a win. *In the beginning was the Macho Man.*

It has a ring to it!
But no. God gives us The Word.

The Word that spoke creation into being and by its call brought forth light and life, the Word that gave breath to the clay and called it humanity.

Why in the world would John's Christmas story begin there?

Perhaps more than any other holiday, Christmas evokes in us a desire to remember. We remember the traditions we've long kept, and we attempt to bring those moments forward, to give them flesh.

For John too, it seems like Christmas is about *memory*. The Evangelist begins the Good News all the way back in hopes that it recalls something in us. John goes back to when there was no time, no space, back to when there was there was only the Word in communion with the Father by the power of the Spirit. In evoking the beginnings, John calls his hearers to *remember* the Word's gift: goodness hovering over chaos and calling forth life where before there was only incomprehensible void. Goodness in our creation, goodness in our relationships, goodness in our flesh-and-blood being.

To properly tell the story of Jesus Christ, John wants to remind us of who God is and what we were created to be.

Which brings us to the baby, this *Word* that has become *flesh*.

Ashley Anne Masters, a pastor in North Carolina and child of this Presbytery, recalls a strange Christmastime encounter she had in the grocery checkout line one year. The customer in front of her asked the cashier for Christmas stamps. The clerk regretfully informed the patron the store wasn't selling anything Christmasy. There were only two designs available: one, the liberty bell. The other, quote, "some lady holding a baby," a design Ashley-Anne immediately recognized as Madonna and Child, Mary and the lil' baby Jesus.

Once again, our familiarity the Christmas story has, I'm afraid, dulled us to its strange edges. We proclaim the eternal Word. And then we tell one another that the Word of Creation dwelt among us as...a baby. In our nativities and ornaments and twinkling yard displays we stage the scene: some lady, a donkey, and a baby. A regular baby. Like us in every way. With scrapes on his skin from those impossibly long newborn nails and a tuft of messy hair. Smelling and crying and fragile. A child not so different than the one you just promised to raise up. A child with needs, with vulnerabilities, and with hope.

For a long while the story of God is as simple, as intimate as that. The Eternal Word with some lady.

Look at the nativity again. This is the Flesh of God and the Flesh of Humanity. At Christmas, this is the story we celebrate. The Word that anchors our truth, corrects our banalities, our meanness, and ingratitude is none other than this child. Just another baby, or so it seems, being cradled by just another mother.

For many of us it's been a long year. The world and our words spin wildly. I know many of us in in these walls are exhausted, caring for children and parents, many more are mourning the lost of friends and loved ones or good health, and still others deeply afraid for one another and for God's creation...the darkness of December presses the edges of our lives.

Against all that darkness, the Church at Christmas proclaims a child, the Word.

The impossible, contradictory, scandalous, and beautiful affirmation of Christmas is that the Word, the generating principal of all life, the bounteous gift of shared love, the light which cannot be quenched, has become flesh. Dirty and fragile, weak and precious. The Word become Flesh living among us. The Word became our brother. The Word took up lodging *in our darkness*, amidst our anxiety and endless chatter, and in the heart of our uncertainty.

Not on a throne, not riding valiantly into battle, not in the legislator's seat or the boxing ring. God came to us in a back alley manger in a podunk village. The Word came

screaming into our consciousness, hollering at the top of his lungs, hungry for milk and his mother. This is the beginning of the story *for us*. The anchor point of our life, of our meaning, is one of us. The God we worship shares our flesh, our history, our hopes.

The Word became flesh! In that sentence, in those words, all human hope is contained. The Word became flesh so that our endless chatter might become generative, so that our living might become abundant life, so that our darkened fear might be transformed to brilliant light. The Word became flesh to remind us what we were created be, *very good*, to correct us and re-orient us toward God and one another.

We are called to align all our speech and our lives with *the* Word, not the network, the post, or the tweet. That “The Word became flesh” is to challenge our banal speech and vague spin. To say “the Word became flesh” is to affirm everyday existence, to affirm our worth *and* the worth of our flesh-and-blood siblings throughout creation, those who cry out in need of their mothers and whose only companions are barn animals in back alleys.

To say “the Word became flesh,” this particular strange flesh that we each share, it is to affirm human dignity regardless of nationality, race, gender, sexuality, or any other false dividing line we with our words have set.

The Word became flesh. But that’s not the end. After crying and growing the Word spoke. And now it’s our obligation, especially at Christmas, to listen and then to respond.

Why else in the Gospel’s prologue, this triumph of Biblical literature, would the fourth evangelist include an interlude about John, the one who “came as a witness to testify to the light”? When the Evangelist points to John the Baptist he cranes his neck toward us. We, like the Baptist, are called to witnesses to the Word, to the one whose very presence is light and life.

The work of the Baptist is the beginning of the Christmas story for us. Not just to *see* the child but to point to him amidst the world’s darkness, to speak his peace and do his work: finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry, releasing the prisoner, reconciling peoples, and bringing peace.

To say “the Word became flesh” means that God so loved creation that he came to this far country, not to rescue us from it but to reconcile us with it, and transform us into a new way of living, a way that remembers the goods of Genesis. To say “the Word became flesh” is to affirm the light and to seek it out, to point to it and in so doing to participate in the casting out of all the world’s darkness.

You know maybe the Macho Man is too much. In our world we don’t need more court jesters, more showmanship, or more empty signaling.

We need meaning and light, we need *the* Word, some lady and a baby, whose presence disrupts our inertia and whose being reminds us of our call.

Amidst all of our talking, where might we begin the wild, foolish story of Christmas? Perhaps the Word is the right beginning: the Word fragile in a manger and fragile on a cross. The Word who calls us to account, not only because we are great sinners, but because at the beginning and all of our beginnings we were created very good, and being reminded of that is the call of Christmas.

By dwelling this season on the good light, the light which turns us outward—toward podunk Bethlehem and back-alley Greenville, toward the poor and the outcasts, the despised, untouchables of our world—we can, like John, proclaim The Word, we can, like the Baptist, point to the light, we can, like that lady, hold on the child, the very one who created, sustains, and transforms all of our beginnings and who always calls us on.

Merry Christmas. Happy New Year. Find the light, tell the story, get to work.