

“The Word Becomes Flesh”  
Christmas 2  
Series B (John 1:1-18)

Pastor Bruce K. Modahl  
Grace Lutheran Church  
January 4, 2008

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

The first part of this sermon is a sing-a-long. I want to sing “Before the marvel of this night.” It is hymn 636 in With One Voice, the blue hymnal. We remain seated.

“Tear the sky apart with light and with your news the world endow.” The marvel of the word becoming flesh. The marvel of it begins to hit home to me when I consider how ineffective my own words can be. Parents, how effective are your words in creating order in your children's rooms? In a meeting, one man kept explaining and another man at the table kept furrowing his brow and studying the paper and saying he didn't understand it. He was still in the dark, he said, waiting to be enlightened. Finally Mike pushed his chair back, threw his hands up and said, “Ollie, I can't make it any clearer than that.”

Perhaps the closest any of us will come to the experience of having our words take form is in the process of building something. The architect meets with the church building committee, for example, and listens to words about God and the function of the building. The architect sketches out the words with drawings. The words become, well, not flesh and blood, but wood and concrete. They take form. I'm quite certain the building committee said the usual things about faith and function to the Orlando, FL architect, who came back with the drawing of a church resembling a flower in bloom. They may have been amazed that their poor words would take on such a design. Only, what is it a flower bloom is designed to do? Collect and hold water. The roof did a good job of it. Over the years the efforts to fix the leaking roof exhausted both the finances of the people and their will to continue. Often we are disappointed at the effectiveness of our words, the shape and form they take.

Sometimes, however, our words fare better. Such was the case at the first congregation I served. The new church was built in the '60s, more than ten years before I arrived. The architect,

again after listening, said he had an idea he wanted to explore which he thought would give form to what the people said. He said he wanted to join together two trapezoids: one shaped like this, another like this. When the two shapes were put together they looked like this. Windows for a skylight were in this section. The children immediately nicknamed it the cash register church. On Halloween several young men of the congregation walked up the sloping roof and attached to the some king size bed sheets on which they had written “No Sale.” The pastor of the church and the building committee took a great deal of guff from old time members as they saw it going up. Other pastors in the community were merciless in making fun of it. Walking inside, however, was a different experience altogether. The guff stopped. The teasing came to an end. Coming in the front door through the entryway and into the church proper the ceiling was no more that eight feet. That was ample room for anyone. However, it was lower than the ceiling in the entryway. The recessed lighting blared down. The effect was to make a person hunch over and duck. Walk three more steps into the church and suddenly the ceiling broke open; the sloping roof line rose dramatically; the brick work soared. In an otherwise windowless church, light tore in from the skylight onto the altar. It spoke of the grandeur, the magnificence, and the strength of God. It gave us a hint of God’s glory, that “teasing taste of what [we] miss.” It unfolded from that narrowing at the entry. Sometimes our words take shape, exceeding our expectations.

When the Word of God became flesh, God was submitting to a narrowing. “Immensity cloistered in a womb,” is John Donne’s description. “Immensity cloistered in a womb,” in flesh and blood, and in a manger. The world responded with more than guffaws and mockery. Even though it is the self-same Word by which God spoke the world into being, the world did not receive him. His own did not accept him. That’s because we get enamored of our own words and designs and building programs and so are consigned under our leaky roofs in the darkness. But that does not confound the love of God.

God knows the only way we flesh and blood ones can know him is by what we can get our eyes on and our arms around. Abstractions will not do. God submits to this narrowing in order that we might know him intimately. Finally here is where it narrows, the cross. He submits to this narrowing in order that he might know us intimately. The most intimate, personal experience we will ever have is at the time of our death. One country song says, “You got to walk that lonesome valley. You got to walk it by yourself. Nobody else can walk it for you.” Loved ones surround our bedside. They hold our hands and care for us. When it comes to dying we go there without them, but not alone. God in Christ submits to this narrowing so that we can know him at this most intimate and personal moment. With him leading the way we pass through the narrows, in one writer’s words, to “an entirely different dwelling awaiting us, far beyond the small tents we drag around during our pilgrimage here on earth. We have the glory of God as our home, and we catch glimpses of it even now. Those who enter by the narrow way have an unexpected surprise at the end of the hall. As we walk through the narrow door and die to ourselves, Christ raises us up and makes us ready for a new life, eternal life” (Gracia Grindal, “The Word Becomes Flesh, *The Christian Century*, Dec. 18-25, 1996, p. 1249).

The Evangelist John was in the business of glimpse giving and word testifying. It is what the church building in Manchester, Missouri did. How shall we do the same? The Word forms our lives, submits us to the narrowing, and walks us through the narrow door, which is Jesus Christ. The Word leads us through his death and resurrection to die to ourselves. Thereby, we become gates, points of entry to intimacy with God in Christ. It is a daily narrowing to which we are called.

This is becoming abstract. Theology tends in that direction. The word became flesh. So what does it look like in the flesh? One thing it looks like is Steve and Kara Eichhorn. You will not read about them in a book or magazine. However, each with a baby in arms and a toddler, Kami, in hand, they were at the forefront of a group from the congregation who went to the

airport to welcome refugees from Bosnia Herzegovina. These families came off the plane shell shocked from the trauma of conflict in their country that pitted neighbor against neighbor. They left everything behind. At the airport smiling people met them with cheers and applause and welcome signs held high. The Eichhorns led the congregation in this endeavor three times. They found housing and furnishings, stocked the kitchen, helped them learn English and find jobs. This is what the Word becoming flesh looks like.

It looks like Pastor Mitre Raheb of Christmas Lutheran Church of Bethlehem in the land we call holy. You will read about him in magazines like *The Lutheran* and in books he has authored. I saw at least one by him in the library display in the atrium. His congregation sponsors a gathering of youth who are Muslim, Christian and Jewish. They come together to build friendship and understanding. Once again we hear the boots of the tramping warriors and see the garments rolled in blood, as the prophet Isaiah said. We see the vapor trails of rockets fired from one direction and hear the screaming fighter planes coming from the other. These appear to be stronger than any paltry group of youth meeting to promote reconciliation. It appears the rockets and war planes will carry the day. But we know better. We have it on good authority, God's own authority that the foundation of peace being laid by these young people is what will win in the end. "Now to the loveless world be shown, now break upon its deathly night. Into one song compress the love that rules our universe above." God's love and peace rule the universe.

In these people we see by their words and in the form those words take a submission to the narrowing, a dying to self in order that they might testify to the light. They show us ways it fleshes out in real life. How about in mine and in yours?