

Isaiah 61: 10 – 62:3  
Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7  
John 1: 1-18  
1 Christmas

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### **“Children and Heirs”**

Many of us have favorite Bible passages – pieces of Scripture that speak to us in deep and particular ways. Some of us have favorite books of the Bible – whole sections that have changed our lives in significant ways. And, it is fair to say, some of us have parts of the Bible we don't like at all. We seldom read them, rarely quote them, and, in some cases, wonder how that part of the Bible got selected at all. This is, I think, particularly true for the Gospels. People do say, “I much prefer Mark's Gospel to Matthew's,” or some such comparative statement. People raise concerns about reading certain sections of a Gospel and bristle at the language or, sometimes, the theology. This is particularly true about the treatment of the Jews in The Passion Narrative in the Gospel of John. And, there are some scholars who believe that the early church picked the wrong Gospels entirely and much prefer the Gospel of Thomas over the four that did make the cut. But like it or not, we read from the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in a three-year cycle. You might be thinking how to you get four Gospels in a three year cycle? The answer is that we use the Gospel of John like an accent color – it does not take over the narrative for a year but rather is used to make certain theological points as a contrast or enhancement of the other three Gospels.

So it should come as no surprise that on the first Sunday after Christmas, we hear the very beginning of the Gospel of John rather than more stories of the days following the birth of the Messiah. It provides a theological claim about the Messiah and a form of birth narrative that surpasses the other two birth narratives in the other Gospels. Its claim is simple but stunning. There was never a time when Christ Jesus was not. It uses several powerful metaphors about the Messiah and interweaves them throughout the Gospel. Jesus is the Word; Jesus is the Word that became flesh; Jesus is the Light; and later Jesus is the Lamb of God. This use of metaphor – especially the imagery of Word and Flesh, and Light and Dark are metaphors that resonant deep within the human consciousness. They speak to fundamental wonderings about reality and the human place in the cosmos.

Much of western thought is based on Greek philosophy. We are, in many ways, a Greco-Roman culture with Christian overtones. It was the Greeks who spent time developing ways of explaining and measuring and analyzing the world. One of their critical observations was the ideas remained unchanged and uncorrupted while flesh changed and corrupted. They created a dichotomy between the ideal and the real. The ideal was pristine and unchanging while the real was always changing and declining and failing. This observation, in turn, led to the belief that the ideal world was more important than the real world. And that suggested that the mind was superior to the body. For the mind dealt with ideas – with concepts – with the pure and unchanging rather than the earthly body with its messiness and corruptibility. The Greeks idealized certain aspects of human character but deplored the incessant decline of the body from one's youthful moment of excellence. That is why all those amazing Greek statues are of young people rather than old people.

In light of this, the Johannine notion that in the beginning was the Logos – the word and that word was with God and the word as God is not terribly hard to link to the pre-existing Greek notions about the primacy of the idea as pure and unchanging. But, suddenly, the word became flesh; the word – the idea, the pure unchanging concept became earthly flesh – became incarnate and entered into this messy, changing, corrupting world. God became fully human yet remained fully divine. We, I think, tend to skip over this astonishing argument and move on to our worries and disbeliefs about when Jesus was born and how did the miracles happen, if he did them at all. But we must dwell a bit on this extraordinary claim that is central to the Gospel of John if we are to understand its critical place in Christian theology and if we are to understand its complex history within Christianity.

John's Gospel makes a revolutionary argument that God, the divine, all-powerful, unchanging, perfect One becomes fully human and accepts all the limitations, all the pain, all the annoyance of being fully human. Moreover, by taking on human existence, without cheating, God sanctifies human existence by God's willing participation in our world. This is how we claim to be God's children and this is how we claim our place with God in this world and in the next.

Christianity, as it moves away from its Jewish roots, runs into this Greek notion of the mind-body split. Given that argument in John's Gospel about the word becoming flesh, one might think the church, as it matured, would overcome the mind-body split in some definitive way. We would be wrong. The church ends up, for centuries, accepting the notion that the fleshly part of us, our incarnate bodies, are dangerous and will lead us into sin unless we dominate our bodies with our minds. Christianity turns its back on the core argument of John's Gospel – the word made flesh and holds to the notion that everything of this world is impure and dangerous. And so, the church slips into misogyny and denial and excessive asceticism including self-flagellation and other body-hating, flesh-denying schemes. The church also holds up the sins of the flesh as the worst sort of sins and looks away from the Gospel's more balanced view of what constitutes actions that disrupt the kingdom of God. This focus on personal sin turns attention away from corporate sin, from our failure to care for widows and orphans, our failure to care for creation itself. It allows gluttony and simony to flourish and brings about the complicity of the church in wars of conquest, of torture, and of hatred and prejudice.

The word became flesh. What possible meaning could that sentence have for us today? Can we, even as children of God, make words become flesh? In a way, we can. When we take ideas and bring them into reality, words become flesh. When we stop talking about inclusion or charity or peace or justice and go out and make those things happen, words become flesh. When we act on our beliefs, words become flesh. When we take what we say and turn it into what we do, words become flesh.

Our bodies are not our enemies. Our culture is filled with that notion. We are incarnate – enfleshed creatures. We have no earthly existence without our bodies. But this incarnate world is God-created and God-loved. God so loved the whole world that God gave God's Son so that we might have ever-lasting life. We, ourselves, are words made flesh. And in the making of the flesh, we are also ideas and concepts and abstractions and things not yet seen and things not yet

known. We are not one or the other, we are both word and flesh and both come from God. Thus, both deserve our love and care and respect. To deny one over the other is to deny God.

We are called children of God because we are beloved of God, made in God's image in the same way God took on our existence and lived among us as one of us. Paul concludes that we are no longer slaves but rather we are children of God and therefore heirs of all that was and is and shall be. The Word becoming Flesh made that bond unbreakable long before civilization stirred. Our union with God, in God, through God and, therefore, with one another is not debatable. From the fullness of God, as lived by Christ Jesus, we have all received, grace upon grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.