

2nd Sunday after Christmas/Epiphany Sunday
Sermon 1.3.16

Scripture: John 1:1-18
Matthew 2:1-23

The claim was a scandalous one from the start, but John made it boldly—and (it should be said) brilliantly. Actually, in John’s gospel, it’s the initiating idea: that Jesus is the word of God made flesh.

Scandalous, right? Well, perhaps not to us, but almost definitely to the two major social groups of the Ancient Near East, both Jews and Greeks. Neither would have been open to such a claim; neither would have found such a thing even conceivable.

I think it’s hard for us to imagine that something might have been unimaginable—which is different from saying we can’t imagine the unimaginable. Really, the unimaginable is, by definition, that which we cannot imagine. But I’m talking about the idea that there might be such things that are unimaginable. After all, we’re surrounded by images that we ourselves didn’t imagine and yet we’ve been given to imagine. The whole world of contemporary cinema is a buffet of images given to us to imagine things we likely wouldn’t have come up with ourselves.

I had the strange experience of being at a zoo the other day, observing an iguana, and remarking that it looked like something out of the *Star Wars* universe, something Luke Skywalker might have encountered in the cantina in Mos Eisley. Weird that I would encounter something real, and living, and *old* (Iguanas have been that way since long before humans roamed the earth), and find it so strange that I’d have to relate to it through something imagined and unreal (as far as we know). Think about it: it would make more sense to observe the imaginings of George Lucas on display in that fictional and cinematic cantina and think, “That alien beast looks like an iguana,” rather than the other way around. But such is the world as we know live in it: so much that would be, to any one of us, unimaginable is to all of us imaginable simply because of mass media.

All of which is to say that I think we’re so used to encountering such “unimaginable” images that we might struggle to imagine that there were once things that were truly unimaginable.

Among the Greeks, *Logos* was understood as “Word,” as in “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” This, *Logos*, was understood to be the logic of the universe, the divine

reason implicit in the cosmos. And it was a disembodied notion: *Logos* was an insistently disembodied notion. Indeed, it had to be disembodied because it had to be in every body. It could not be *somewhere* because it had to be *everywhere*. Activated in the beginning, it would continue throughout time to give all that is form and meaning. Permeating all reality, *Logos* was referred to also as providence, nature, god, and the soul of the universe.

Among Jews, this *Logos* was a new term for the ancient one known as Wisdom or Sophia or Ruah, which is to say spirit or breath. The wind that blew over the darkened deep at the beginning, God's companion and consort before time began, *Logos*, wisdom, word, law, was also God's co-creator in the beginning and God's continuing delight as a child is to her parent. The intermediary between God and the cosmos, she or he or it or this was both the agent of creation and the agent by which the human mind can imagine God and the human heart can relate to God. But, as with the Greek notion of *Logos*, this was stubbornly disembodied notion. Indeed, to claim it might be embodied is to violate its nature, is to claim something blasphemous.

But that's what our witness this morning did: John in his gospel, which was an appeal both to Jews and to Greeks, claimed this right at the start: "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh..."

Part of what made this so scandalous is that whole worlds once thought to be wildly at odds with one another now must be considered reconciled with one another, or at least reconcilable. Time and eternity; matter and spirit; mind and flesh: these were all now suggested as interconnected, interwoven.

But how could this be? Everyone knows that such things are separate, must be kept separate, right?

No. Christianity says no. The incarnation of God in Jesus, this doctrine, insists that matter and spirit cohere. The resurrection of the body, this doctrine (which is different from the classical doctrine of the immortality of the soul): the resurrection of the body, this faith-claim, insists that the flesh isn't fallen while the soul soars, but rather that flesh and spirit are conjoined, interrelated.

But if "spirituality," that vague but persistent orientation, continues to imagine clear dualities in the created order, science won't rest so vaguely and easily. No, for the study of

genetics tells us that we're thoroughly embodied. So much of who we are is written into our genetic code. Nothing of who we are could be separated out from our embodied selves. Likewise, neurology tells us that much of our felt life can be observed in the working of our brains. In sum, according to contemporary science and ancient Christian wisdom, our physical reality is our emotional, psychological, spiritual reality.

So, maybe it's not that scandalous anymore. Spiritualism aside, maybe we're comfortable, or at least familiar, with the assertion that the transcendent becomes immanent and dwells among us. Moreover, maybe we're comfortable, or at least familiar, with the claim that the transcendent became most immanent in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus who dwelt among us. (We are, after all, in church, where this is a central claim if not an always stated one. And this is, after all, the season of Christmas, a season festooned with the claim that the baby born in Bethlehem is "Very God, begotten not created.") That Jesus is God-with-us in some way that is particular and profound; that Jesus, who preached with conviction, and healed with compassion, and moved with grace poured out amidst people who needed him and desired him and courage uncowed amidst the powers and principalities who would go to great lengths to subdue him and silence him and snuff him out: that this Jesus, who suffered but himself caused no suffering, and who attracted wrath but sought for himself no revenge: that he is a revelation of God truer than all other claims of God's truth revealed: maybe the "what" of it isn't all that worthy of apologetic or defense or even explanation. But what about the "why" of it?

Why? Why would God come to live among us?

Compassion, it's often said. God's coming to live among us is about God's compassion for our experience in the world, about God living as we live so God might know all the more immediately what it's like to be us. There's nothing we could possibly suffer that God didn't also suffer, and by this we might be encouraged and made unafraid at what life holds for us and what judgment God might exercise as regards each of us and all of us. There's just something strengthening about knowing someone else has faced what you face and can empathize with your experience. How much more, then, is this case when that "someone else" is God?

Certainly the facts as we know them about Jesus' life support this claim that by living among us God would feel compassion for us. After all, God certainly suffered in living among

us—and right from the start. Not months into Jesus' life, Herod decided to kill all the infants born in and around Bethlehem in order to extinguish the possibility that there had been born a true king for all the people, one who was good and just and powerful and kind. This is to say, not months into God as living among us did God suffer physical dislocation and the threat of a violent end—which would of course come, just not yet.

The problem I have with this explanation as to why—why God came to live among us—is its focus on suffering, its focus on pain, as if suffering and pain are what life in the world is all about. True as I think it is, I don't think it's the whole truth or even much of the truth.

I spent the week in southeastern Florida attending a rowing clinic. There I rowed two two-hour sessions in a racing single each day for four days, Monday through Thursday. Each morning, during our first four kilometers around the lake, the coaches would film each rower. Then, after breakfast, we'd gather in a media room to analyze what we'd done.

For over an hour, nearly two, we'd examine each of us—our entry, our drive, our release and feather, our recovery and stability, our engagement with the boat and the water so there might be no distinctions made between the three. Full engagement and fine-tuned response: keep the pressure on the pin, use the full width of the boat and its riggers. Recover using your “lats,” following your hands rather than pulling up from the foot stretcher using your legs. Drive using your core rather than your back and arms: think in terms of pushing with your big muscles rather than pulling with your small ones. Release with your elbows pointed out to the riggers rather than into the bow, which would only force the front of the boat to plunge into the water at just the moment when you want it gliding over its surface. Release and feather when there's nothing more you can do to make the boat go: don't overextend and don't lean back for some final yank. There's no yanking, no catching, no sudden movements. And, while every stroke counts, there are always going to be lots of strokes that you just have to let go. Get out of those and start again, hoping for better this time.

Each time we gathered in that media room, my hands were sore and freshly blistered or peeled clean, my muscles would tighten up and the knot in my upper back would reassert itself. But I'd also grow eager to row again, to get back out there. Watching each of us

experience the weird pleasure of rowing, rowing, I wanted to get back out there, to feel that again for myself.

It's a childish notion that God might have once watched all that life entails—its pains and heartbreaks, and its many, many weird and surprising pleasures—and might simply have wanted to try it out for himself. It's a childish notion that God might have observed all the unfolding consequences of what laws of nature God had established, with the help of the *Logos* in the beginning—and simply wanted to give it all a whirl. It's simplistic, conceiving of God as little more than a child at a playground watching other children play—swing higher than he can, slide faster than she does—watching, watching, until God simply must try such things himself.

But if God came as an infant, then God also became a small child—and therefore was perhaps one who watched bigger kids at play and wanted to join in. And this perhaps recalled a moment out of time when God watched all the world at work and play—us in pleasure, in frustration, sometimes in pain—and likewise wanted to try such things himself.

Yes, it's a simplistic way to imagine God. But I'm okay with such simplification; I'm okay with entertaining childish notions.

In case you're not, though, consider how Cynthia Bourgeault puts it in her book *Wisdom Jesus*.

Of the laws established when the creation came to be, and of the limits and limitations they press upon all creatures including each of us, she writes, "Life presents us with a series of seemingly irrevocable choices. To do one thing means that we have to give up something else... Our confused agendas clash both inwardly and outwardly, and we cause each other pain. Our bodies age; we diminish physically; loved ones fall out of our lives. And the force of gravity is tenacious, nailing our feet to the ground and usually our souls as well..."

But, "...could it be," she wonders, "that this earthly realm, not in spite of but *because of* its very density and jagged edges, offers precisely the conditions for the expression of certain aspects of divine love that could become real in no other way?" Could it be, in other words, that the world as it is, is exactly as it needs to be in order for certain aspects of love to be given expression and made real—aspects such as persistence and faithfulness, compassion and patience, creativity and connection, full engagement and fine response. "These mature and subtle flavors of love," Bourgeault notes, "have no real context in a realm where there are no

edges or boundaries [or limitations,]... where all just flows... But when you run up against the hard edge [or the fixed limit] what emerges is a most precious taste of pure divine love..." and ever-living creative spirit.

I'm struck sometimes at how widely it's accepted that what limitations we might face are to be overcome, that what limits there are in life are to be regarded as wrong, an affront even to our freedom and our self-actualization. I'm struck by how widely our culture has deified limitlessness and un-boundedness. "You can be anything you want to be," we tell our children. "You can have anything you want to have," we communicate, though usually less directly than that.

The thing is, though, that they can't. We can't. Much more bound and determined than we care to admit, we can't *have* anything and *be* anything we want to have or be. I'll never be a Peruvian soldier. I'll never be a builder of Roman aqueducts. But even in my own historical context, at some point, time catches up to me, to us. At some point, we encounter some boundary beyond which we cannot go. At some point the day will end and we'll need to go to sleep. At some point, the money will run out and we'll need to go back to work and answer to a boss and punch in at a given hour. At some point, our strength will wane and our abilities will contract or our priorities will assert themselves and some things will fall away.

I'm struck by how widely such self-evident truths are denied—because to my mind here is where life gets interesting. Here, amidst limits and boundaries, is where real creativity is demanded, and where real faithfulness gets tried and tested, and where real hope is the needed and truly valuable currency, and real love is the most powerful force there is. So, that God might want to come and give this bound and determined life a try: this wouldn't surprise me at all. No, it would delight me. I'd like God all the more.

Artists limit themselves to some certain sized canvas, from which they can create even masterpieces. Poets limit themselves to some form, however fixed or free, and from this might speak to the ages. Athletes submit themselves to the field of play and rules of the given game, and within these givens might move with astonishing power and grace. But no one manages such creative wonder without the discipline of limitation, even self-limitation. And that God would want in on this action scandalizes me not at all.

To think of God as taking on human flesh and form in order to unleash God's compassion is to recognize what will cause pain and suffering in this life. To think of God as

taking on human flesh and form in order to feel what it's like to feel is to widen our focus that we might attend to the pleasures of life as well. They are manifold, and they are minute. Don't ever dismiss them.

As I write, our littlest dog, Daisy, jumps into my lap and curls up, nosing my hands that instead of tapping away at the keys on the keyboard I might and should instead pet her.

So I do.

Thanks be to God.