



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

This sermon is provided for congregational use for Christmas Day or any time during the Christmas season when congregations may welcome a sermon on the Christmas text of John 1:1-14. It may be shown as a video, or the text provided may be proclaimed. However you find it useful, know that our prayers are with you, that you might know the promises of God as we celebrate the Word-made-flesh in Jesus.

Introduction from Bp. Dee Pederson

Blessed Christmas, friends! I wish you Christmas greetings on behalf of the other 229 congregations of our SW MN Synod, the synod staff, and our all of our leaders. Wherever and whenever you are receiving this word – in worship, at home, or away for Christmas.... I pray you know the love of those across this synod and across this church, with whom we are in partnership every day through our ministries. And whatever burdens or joys, questions or concerns you carry in your heart right now, know that God is with you, and that God loves you just as you are for who you are. Because Christ was born – for you!

The Holy gospel according to John, the first chapter:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him... not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life - and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 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.

Sermon by Bishop Dee Pederson

One of the things that people love to DO when we get together for Christmasdays, is tell stories: stories from when we were kids, stories that remember people no longer with us, new stories of the things that just happened in our lives.

- And one of the things I've always LOVED about getting together with my husband's siblings, is that they have GREAT stories to tell – stories like -
 - the time the boys took the seat out of their mother's car and then watched her reaction when she came out of work and found – NO SEAT in her car.
 - Or the time they were travelling across the country, stopped for gas, and accidentally left one of the kids behind at the gas station.
 - Or there was the time they went barrelling down a ski hill on a toboggan and only ONE of them ended up with a broken bone.
- You KNOW the family members who do the best story-telling, and everyone listens, hanging on every word. It doesn't matter that you've heard the same story a dozen times, you love it.
- And if somebody ELSE tells the story & changes it up – leaves out parts, or says something that not true – well, you can be sure there will be protests:
 - *"Wait, what about the part where...."*
 - *"Hey, you forgot the part when Dad....."*

That's kind of what goes on every year with the readings for Christmas. Because on Christmas Eve, we traditionally hear Luke's version of the Christmas story, a story known and loved so well – it just wouldn't be CHRISTMAS if we didn't get to hear it! And then, we blend THAT together with Matthew's version of the story, and you end up with a composite that's different than the way Luke OR Matthew told the story.

But then we come to Christmas and we also get to hear the Christmas story told in a very DIFFERENT way, in John's Gospel. And as you heard, there's:

- no Mary mild, no patient Joseph, no manger, no flocks by night, no angels, no heavenly light, & most remarkably: no little child!

You see, John tells his own kind of Christmas story, and although it's DIFFERENT, you might say THIS Story is bigger & broader than a stable and shepherds. John's Gospel places Jesus at the beginning of creation, points us ahead to the vision of Revelation; and most importantly, lands Jesus right here in the middle with humanity – as near to you as your beating heart, your next breath, and the skin on the palm of your hand.

John begins with words that echo the very first verses of, Genesis: *"In the beginning."*

- *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word WAS God."* WE think of "word" as something written or printed, but John describes JESUS as WORD – "logos" – which means something SAID. Substitute SPEECH for WORD, and it has a whole new meaning.
- *"In the beginning was speech, and the speech was with God, and the speech WAS God. ... And the speech became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth."*
- In Luke's Xmas story, angels bring good news of great joy. In John, JESUS has been singing love and bringing life before anything else, and called everything into being.

- This is what we confess in the words of Creed: *We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God... through whom all things were made*”

- Over the centuries, the Word of God was read & preached in Israel since the time of Moses.

But through the centuries, no one had ever SEEN God. How do you SEE a word? Oh, sure, they saw God’s presence in a burning bush, in a pillar of fire & cloud, but NOT as a PERSON. And in fact, God was so holy, that you didn’t even SPEAK the name of God. So in the OT, God is referred to as, “I am.” Or “*I am who I am.*” When Moses asks God whom he should tell Pharaoh has SENT him to lead people out of slavery, God says, “*Tell them, “I AM” has sent me!*”

But God wasn’t content being a bush or even a blazing fire. I mean, think about it: *YOU* were created in the image of God.

- Would YOU rather be a bush, fire, a cloud, or a human being? Exactly!
- Created in the image of God, YOU were created to be in relationship with other human beings. And this is what GOD wanted.

God loved each and every person so much that God wanted to be ONE with us, one OF us.

- Maybe you’ve felt that in some way: You wanted to be part of a club, part of a team, belong to SOME group of people SO MUCH that you would go to any length in order to BE with those people?

Maybe this is what GOD wanted.

But no one had ever SEEN God - until the Word became flesh in – Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem. In Jesus, the Word of God that was there at creation takes on human flesh and dwells – literally – “tabernacles” – “pitches a tent” – with us as a real human being. In Jesus, God speaks healing, forgiveness, goes to those no one else will associate with, and prays for those who are out to kill him. In Jesus, the Word made flesh, God experiences betrayal, denial, suffering, pain, & death. He brings -

- not judgement, condemnation, darkness, and death,
- but welcome, forgiveness, freedom, light, and life.

And this happens, NOT just in a manger long ago, but here, today, now!! Maybe this is why John gives such little attention to the details of Jesus’ birth. He is, ultimately, more interested in OUR BIRTH, OUR NEW BIRTH as children of God. According to John, that is, Christmas is not really Jesus’ birthday at all; rather, it is *OURS*. Christmas is that time when we celebrate *our birth* as children of God, the keeping of all God’s promises, and the beginning of the restoration of all creation.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, the Word became flesh in a manger. In Bethlehem. And when it came time for the Savior to become the crucified Messiah, he said, NOW – *I am giving my Body and my Blood for you*. And ever since, the Word takes flesh in your life and mine, and Christmas comes to us again in our worship, in our homes, in this moment - where Christ the Lord and Savior comes to meet you once again.

- as truly present here today - as on the first day of creation, as when morning broke and he slept in a manger, and when his flesh was pierced by Roman nails and a Roman spear on a cross.
- present to be your Savior and mine, to reconcile you to God and to each other, to your neighbor in need, and wherever YOU go each day.

- Christ is truly present here, as he will be one day, when God FINALLY makes a home among mortals, dwelling with us, wiping away every tear from our eyes, when pandemics and death will be no more, and mourning & crying & pain will be no more, because all these things will have passed away.

There are many ways to tell a story. Each of them depends upon the story-teller's perspective, and the unique situation of the LISTENERS. Today, we DON'T hear a story about shepherds & angels & a manger. More than just characters in the story of Christmas, John shows us what it looks like when YOU realize that the baby of Bethlehem changes YOUR life forever. The birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh, is never, and never can be, celebrated without your participation in its promises - God taking on flesh and coming as God's living WORD - to speak life to YOU - so that each and every child of earth might recognize ourselves and be recognized, as beloved children of God.

In the beginning God created....In the beginning was the Word – speech - and the Word was WITH God and the Word WAS God....and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's people, and God WILL BE with them."