

“Fleshing It Out”  
John 1:10-18 and Matthew 3:13-17  
January 9, 2011

Well, second Sunday of the New Year and a board meeting. We are definitely back in the routine. Everybody is. I know this because I have seen multiple Christmas trees out by the curb this week. I hate that! It's not that I mind packing decorations away I don't even mind the marital *discussion* that takes place about appropriate storage of the tree lights. What I mind is thinking about what happens to the tree. This has been a live tree cut down in its prime. It was a part of our home, our family's sacred space, for the most festive celebration of the year. I've cared for it and watered it and admired it and thought it the prettiest tree ever. When it's time, I feel a little sorry for it not knowing quite what will become of it. And, once it's gone to the great forest in the sky, and you've vacuumed up the needles and tinsel and everything is back to normal, do you ever stare into the sad empty corner and think, “Now what?” I do.

That question got even louder as CNN reported the news yesterday of the Arizona shooting. I don't know whether the attack was politically motivated, but CNN did say that “The shooting comes amid a highly charged political environment that has seen several dangerous threats against lawmakers.” What is happening to our nation? Is this what we've come to – we don't agree with each other so we threaten each other and call it free speech? What about integrity? Common decency? I was relieved that we were not closing with “Let There Be Peace on Earth” today. Seems like a tease. Let it begin with me? Good one. Now what? Seriously.

Fortunately, your scripture is more inspiring than your preacher today. John quickly reminds us. *That baby we celebrated? That little life claims us from the inside out in a place that the world's worst violence cannot touch. That baby turns us into something pretty spectacular.*

And he says it so eloquently, but be warned that if you go home and read this passage out loud, it is awkward. The words don't fit our mouths like modern lingo, and when something is hard to say, it is hard to understand. I will confess something to you about my own Bible reading, particularly as it relates to sermon preparation. Sometimes, when I read a passage like the 1st chapter of John – so rich in theology, and I know that there is no way I can fully understand it, I just don't worry about it. I sit with Bible until something – just one thing – jumps out. And, of course I study the passage, but how can you preach *the word became flesh AND we have his seen his glory AND from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.* How do you preach all of that in one sermon on one Sunday and still expect to get a table at la Cicina? You can't, so I breathed a sigh of relief when one point popped out for me for today. When the word became flesh, Jesus opened the door for you and me to become sons and daughters of God. Listen to verse 12: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” Really, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is that one point: Jesus gave you and me the power to become the very children of God.

What that means, Wilson's Mills Christian Church, is that Jesus is not all by his lonesome in that word-made-flesh business. He is not an only child. He has brothers and sisters, in 2011, able to continue what he started because we still walk the earth. He is God's Word made flesh, but God has a BIG vocabulary filled with a lot of words. And, God has given all his children the power to bring their word to life. We all have a word.

Think about that: Think about the person you know who has the knack for bringing the word, “generosity” to life. Think about the person you know who has the knack for bringing the word, “compassion” to life. Think about the person you know who has the knack for bringing

the word, “integrity” to life. Think about the person you know who has the knack for bringing the word, “servant” to life. Until someone acts on words, they are just ideas—very good ideas but hidden ideas. Ah, but the moment someone acts on them, the words become flesh.

So my question for each of you is, “What word in you wants to become flesh?” What word does God call you to flesh out? And, here’s a question for this congregation and for the Board today – What word is ready and waiting in this church right now to get out, to live and breathe and have life? What are the words that we want to carry out about our family?

Now, I’ve served here as pastor long enough that I know what some, if not most, of you are thinking. *I don’t think I have a word. I don’t know what my word is.* Let’s suppose this is true, and you are not just using those phrases as an avoidance technique. Let’s suppose that you really don’t know what your word is, and you really don’t know how in the world you can put flesh on to anything that God might want for your life, your church, or your world. Today is your lucky day, because between John and Jesus and God, there’s a word for you. At the very least, you can leave today with a starter word. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” That’s us, believers – children of God. As children of God, we all start with the same word God used with his child Jesus on the day of his baptism – beloved. Jesus went into that water with John, and out of the clouds came the voice: “This is my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” That is quite an endorsement...in fact, after those words came spilling down out of heaven, Jesus had to take a moment - 40 days worth of moments in the desert to think about what it meant to be God’s beloved child. Then, he brought his word to LIFE so much so that in the week before his death, the leaders of the temple beefed up their challenge of his life’s work with the question of by what authority do you do these things? And, Jesus answered with reference to his baptism. “Was the baptism of John from heaven or not? I was baptized. I’m the beloved made flesh. That’s why I do the things I do.”

My fear is that we take all of God’s lovely words – like beloved - and we are satisfied to speak them, to affirm them, to think deeply about them, to facebook them, to hear them preached but when some person or some conversation or some decision cries out for us to wrap up God’s words in OUR flesh, we’d rather prop them on the curb like old Christmas trees – scared if we hold on to them for too long they might catch fire. I get that. God’s word has us forgiving people when we’d rather settle a score. God’s word has us speaking calm words to people who have spoken nothing but ugly rhetoric. God’s word has us turning towards others when we are encouraged, in a million ways, to lead lives of profound selfishness. God’s word has us reclaiming integrity in our behavior and in our speech even when we have the American right to do otherwise. God’s word has us holding each other accountable for the greater good when that makes us uncomfortable. When God’s words call me to do that, I’m scared of them catching fire, too – scared that they hold me to a higher authority than my own opinions and scared that they are going to demand something from me. Those are legitimate fears. God’s word is supposed to make it harder, not easier, to ignore our responsibility to build a more compassionate world. The fear that you might give up part of yourself is legitimate. But, that’s the dream. Don’t you see? It goes against everything our culture tells us to pursue, but that’s the dream – a group of people who embody THE word, who submit themselves to a cause greater than private ambition, on behalf of this love and this grace that we talk about. It’s a beautiful redemptive dream. A dream that, if you want, we could start to flesh out. It has happened.

Fred Craddock tells of a tiny rural mission church in a place called Watts Bar Lake in Appalachia. On Easter, they held a baptismal service at the river right at sundown. After the baptismal candidates had been dunked in the water, they waded across to the shore, where the

congregation had set up little booths for changing clothes and hanging blankets. When they had dried and changed, they formed a little circle around the campfire to get warm, then the rest of the congregation formed a larger circle around them. A man introduced the new people with their names, where they lived and where they worked. Then the ritual would begin. One by one, each person in the outer circle became a word made flesh. It went something like this. My name is Shelley, or is that Servant, and if you ever need somebody to do washing or ironing...my name is strength and if you ever need anybody to chop wood...my name is patience and if you ever need anybody to babysit...my name is compassion and if you ever need anybody to sit with the sick...my name is generosity and if you ever need a car to go to town. Around the circle it went until those in the center were fully adopted children of God, part of the body, part of a place where every day the word became flesh and every week they studied their word and all the work that comes with it. Then, they ate and they had a square dance, and at the end, one church member said, "Craddock, folks don't get any closer than this." Fred Craddock says he told this story once to bunch of city folk, who listened politely but ended up asking him, "Fred, what do they call that where you come from?" He replied, "I don't know what you call it where you come from. But where I come from we call it...church." The place where God keeps his words.

Church is the start. Really. This is it. We are not just a dictionary of individual words, but a paragraph of words that could give such a wonderful description of God. I know that it's my job to tell you that church is important. I know it's my job to remind you that each one of you has a word that God could so help you bring to life here. But, this morning, I don't say these things because it's my job. I actually believe it. I have to. The church – as flawed as it is - is the world's hope. This where God strings all kinds of twinkling words together to speak to the world. So, we've got to get it right. If we don't, CNN is happy to report louder words. If we don't put some skin and bones around God's words, others will take their place. So, let it begin with me? You'd better believe it. I am putting you on alert that I am weary of hearing the news day after day that the world's ugliest loudest words are successfully bossing the rest of us around. Starting here and starting today, as your pastor, I say we get out of namby pamby land and hold each other accountable for the God-given words. Everyone will have some sort of words that spin yesterday's events to benefit their party, their platform, and their policies. But who will speak words of the soul? Compassion. Who will embody the word of God's love for all people? ALL people. Decency. Who will embody integrity in their debates? Love. Who will embody our higher calling to care for each other? Those are words of the soul. They are important. If we don't speak for the soul, our silence will surely minister to evil. More than ever, it is time for the word to be made flesh. And, I pray to God it dwells at the corner of Powhatan and Fire Department Road.