

# *The Living Nativity*

## **John 1:1-14**

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“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Those words serve as the culmination of an incredibly powerful introduction to the gospel of John. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. And then somehow, some way, through some sort of amazing miracle we will never fully comprehend, this eternal and creative Word of God who was God entered our world not as a God but as a human being. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” If we have grasped even in the smallest measure this Word becoming flesh we will understand what John means when he writes, “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.”

The blessings include those words that are unique to the gospel of John, those words where Jesus says time and time again, “I am...” God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush with the words, “I am who I am.” Now the Word of God who is God becomes flesh and dwells among us and he too says, “I am...”

- “I am the bread of life”
- “I am the light of the world”
- “I am the door”
- “I am the good shepherd”
- “I am the resurrection and the life”
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life”
- “I am the true vine”

With each one of those statements Jesus names the blessings he brings, the blessings that we receive one after another. The blessings include turning water into wine, feeding multitudes, healing the lame, walking on the water, giving sight to the blind, and raising Lazarus from the dead. And when his life came to an end he loved his own, he loved us. He loved us by washing our feet. He loved us by laying down his life for us. He loved us by sending his Spirit to us, to be with us, to be our Comforter, so that we would never be alone. And he loved us when he stood in the garden, now risen from the dead, and he called us by name. It began with that lonely woman bowed down with sadness, believing only that her beloved Lord Jesus had died. He called her by name that day in the garden, that day of resurrection. “Mary.” And we believe he who died and rose again continues to call people by name. I believe he knows you by name and calls you by name. All because “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Entering the holiday season we experienced something in the church office. The weather was getting cold, the days were getting short, and a few people started coming by church, knocking on the door, and asking if we had any gift cards to help with food. At the time we didn't have any, so we had to say no. But then over the next several weeks as we made the need known for gift cards, and many of you responded very generously, we had some cards available to give out. Somebody came by and we helped them out. We were able to say yes. It was a very nice feeling to have something to give. Well, no sooner had we said yes to one person then we started to see others coming in. It was obvious that the word was spreading that we had gift cards. As the word spread more and more people came in asking for gift cards. Good news travels fast.

This morning, on a day when the youth and children will present *The Living Nativity* at our 10 am service, I guess I just wanted to say that I hope we never lose sight of the good news we have been given. In John we are told the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In Luke, we are told this Word becoming flesh was born as a baby in a manger, welcomed into the world by shouts of Glory to God in the Highest and Peace with all whom God is pleased. The shepherds rushed to Bethlehem, saw the Christ child lying in the manger, and then left. But they did more than simply leave. They spread the word concerning what had taken place and all who heard their message were amazed. The good news traveled as the shepherds told their story of a child born in a manger.

If the good news of gift cards travels fast...if the good news about groceries...about a gallon of milk...a loaf of bread...a package of hamburger...some fruit and veggies...if the good news about gift cards travels fast...then what about the good news of God entering our world to live with us, to die for us, to save us, and to claim us for his own...then what about the good news of the God who loves this world so much he sends his only begotten Son? Isn't that good news worth sharing?

There is a story that is found in II Kings chapter 7. It is a strange story that occurs during a very difficult time in the life of Israel. The Israelites are being attacked in their capitol city of Samaria. The ones attacking are the Arameans. The Arameans lay siege to Samaria. As time goes on and the siege continues a famine ensues. Prices skyrocket and people are led to desperate measures as they try to survive. As the story of the siege is recounted we are introduced to four lepers, ones whose skin disease keeps them from entering into the city gates and fully participating in the life of the community. They are outsiders, if not outcasts. They too are suffering from the famine, and since there is no help for them within the city walls, they decide to go to the camp of the ones attacking, the Arameans, and throw themselves on the mercy of their enemies.

Unbeknownst to them, the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, “Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us! So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives.” When the four lepers arrive at the camp of their attackers, ready to surrender and accept their fate, they find the camp deserted. Listen to what happens.

“The men who had leprosy reached the edge of the camp and entered one of the tents. They ate and drank, and carried away silver, gold and clothes, and went off and hid them. They returned and entered another tent and took some things from it, and hid them also.” They looted the enemy. They loaded up on treasure and tucked it safely away. But before they looted the camp they feasted, eating and drinking to their heart’s delight.

Who knows how long this went on? Who knows how much food they ate, how much drink was drunk, and how much treasure was stashed. But we do know at some point they said to each other, “We’re not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let’s go at once and report this to the royal palace.” (II Kings 7:1-9)

There is something so right about this story. “This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves.” They had food. They had drink. They had treasure. But the rest of the city was still stuck inside, still starving, still quivering in fear, still living in desperation and despair. So those four lepers decided it was not right to keep the good news to themselves. They went and told the others where they could find food, where they could find drink, where they could find treasure.

Now if four lepers who found food...who found drink...who found treasure...knew it was not right to keep this good news to themselves...then what about us? We have heard the good news of Jesus Christ. We have heard that the Word of God who was with God in the beginning and who was God, this Word of God has become flesh and dwelt among us. He came to earth. He brought one blessing after another after another after another and after another. If that news has touched our lives...if that news has blessed us...if that news has brought us forgiveness...if that news has reached into our despair and brought hope...if that news has met us when life was meaningless and filled us with purpose and passion...if that news has come to us when we were drowning in our tears and brought comfort and strength...if that news has spoken into the graveyard of our lives and brought resurrection and new birth...then what about us? Is it right to keep that good news to ourselves?

People come to church to get gift cards. I like that. Sometimes we get phone calls because people need a place to get married. Fine, I love doing weddings. More often than I would have expected people call church because they need a place to have a memorial service. They asked other places and didn't have any luck. So they come here and we honor their loved one and we share words of hope and words about the love of Jesus Christ. A young man came this summer who was trying to overcome addictions. Some in the military have PTSD and are seeking healing and wholeness from the trauma they have experienced. Some have relationships that fall apart. But not everyone comes who has a need. Not everyone comes who has a longing, who is struggling, who is searching. Not everyone comes. And it is for those that we are faced with the question of those four lucky lepers. "How can we keep this good news to ourselves?" Not everyone comes here. So we have to go there, if we want to share the good news.

Today we are having *The Living Nativity*. It is more than a dramatic presentation. It is a witness to the great truth of the incarnation. God has become human. The Word has become flesh. He has dwelt with us and he dwells with us now. God is alive and active and God is searching and seeking because God is love and he longs to be in relationship with his children. How can we keep this good news to ourselves? We have some handouts today. They aren't much, just some sheets that tell about a pretty important event coming up in two weeks. These little flyers are invitations to our Christmas Eve and our Christmas Day service. I don't know what you will do with this. You might lay it on the door of your neighbor and run. You might stuff it in their mailbox. You might write a little note that goes with it and send it someone you care about. You might go downtown or to your school or office and tack it up on a bulletin board. You might post it on Facebook or tweet it on twitter.

Whatever you do with it, if you do anything with it, that's a great start. And I strongly encourage you not to get discouraged if the place you put it gets no response or the person you give it to shows no interest. All we can do is share the good news. We can't force someone to receive it. All you can do with the good news is to share it.

Once we share it, we never know what will happen. We moved to Houston in 1995 and we found a fun walking trail near our house. We hadn't been in town but a few weeks when I was jogging on the trail and I ran into a guy who walked with me a ways. We introduced ourselves. I told him my name was Wayne and he said his name was Karl. After we talked for a while Karl found out I was a Presbyterian pastor. He loved it. He told me he belonged to a Presbyterian church just down the

street but that he had stopped going to church. I invited him to our church and he said he would come. I saw Karl a few months later and he apologized for not coming but said he would get there soon. That was in 1995. Karl never came in 1995. For the next eighteen years I would pass Karl two or three times a year. He would greet me with the biggest smile. And the first thing he would do is apologize for not coming to church. And then he would promise he would be there soon.

On Christmas Eve in the year of 2013, I showed up to our candlelight service. I greeted people, listened to the music being played, and then made my way to the chancel area. I took my seat and looked out on our congregation. As is the case on Christmas Eve many students were back, many people who might come just once or twice a year were there, as well as the faithful. I was nodding and smiling and waving to folks. And then the doors opened and much to my surprise my friend Karl entered the service. He brought his wife, his two adult children, and a friend. They walked to the very first row of pews and sat down. Karl smiled at me and gave me a wink. That whole service as he sang and smiled and held his candle high in the air during the singing *Silent Night*, my heart was filled with joy. When he greeted me after the service he shook my hand warmly and said, "Told you I'd come." Eighteen years later, but that guy kept his word. What I loved about Karl is he immediately started telling all his friends, and this guy had tons of friends in all walks of life. He started telling all of his friends about the good news of Jesus Christ. He just couldn't keep the good news to himself. I hope you can't either. We haven't found gift cards...we haven't found a deserted camp with food and drink and bounty...we haven't found any earthly treasure. We have found Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, the Savior of the World. This news is too good to keep it to ourselves. So may we be like the shepherds, spreading the word about this good news of great joy. For Christ our Savior is born.