

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT Faith and Art: Fully Human, Fully God

John 1:1-18

Faith and Art series exhibit of works by NPC artists revealing how God is redeeming humankind and creation

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Sunday, February 26, 2012

First service - 8:15 a.m. Chapel; 9:15 and 11 a.m. Sanctuary

I have to say, I'm very excited about this morning. Not only do we have a wonderful passage from Scripture to talk about, but we also have a whole gallery of artwork by children, members, and friends of NPC downstairs in Stone Hall. These works reflect the theme for this year's Faith and Art series: Fully Human, Fully God. That theme is centered on John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." Participation in this series continues to grow, and I hope it's something you feel proud to invite others to share in here at NPC.

We are believers focused on the Word of God in Holy Scripture. Our whole life of worship and fellowship are centered on what we find in the pages of the Bible. So it is good and right that we would go to the Bible first for inspiration when we engage in creating works that reflect our faith and give witness to the power of Jesus' presence in our lives.

In the act of creating visual forms of witness, such as our artists have done today, we reflect the image of God our creator, whose Spirit hovered over the deep at the beginning of time, and who fashioned us out of the dust of the earth and quickened us to life with his very breath. No doubt you will find many expressions downstairs of what it means to Christian artists that God would become one of us, for the Word to become incarnate.

I asked our liturgist this morning to read from the very beginning of the Gospel of John, because it contains some of the richest and most poetic prose we find in the Bible concerning who Jesus is to us. These opening words of John's Gospel are quite familiar. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* They seem to echo the opening words of Genesis concerning the creation of the world.

If this passage were completely new to your ears, you might wonder what this *Word* is John is referring to. You might think the Word was someone or something in addition to God, as if there is another divine entity or agent we have not heard about up until this point in Scripture. We know about God the creator. We know about the Spirit. We have read of Jesus' ministry in the other Gospels. But who or what is this mysterious Word? It sounds abstract.

A little background is helpful. You see, up until the time of Jesus, the Greek word *logos* was one that described, as one commentary puts it, "the principle and pattern that gave the world or cosmos its character and coherence." You might understand *logos* as what gives creation its order and beauty of design. It carries structural, organizational, poetic, and creative connotations.¹

Then you discover in reading the accounts of creation in Genesis how God spoke creation into being. In the first seven days of creation, the verses in Genesis say, *God said...* and various things came into being. God's word IS the creative force of life. So when we get to the book of John, the Gospel writer makes the connection between God's creative speech in the beginning, and Jesus, God's beloved Son. Jesus is the Word, the One who gives the world its character and coherence.

When trying to understand the meaning of a passage, I think it is important to ask what question the passage might seek to answer. I believe the question John is seeking to answer might sound like this, "We know the universe is beautifully fashioned. All the stars and planets are perfectly aligned, the flowers of the field are rich and beautiful, all our needs for food and shelter are provided. How did this all come to be?"

John's answer is, "It came to be through Jesus Christ, who is not just a principle or pattern that gives the world character and coherence. The Word is not only an idea or divine agent of God, the Word was with God from the very beginning, and the Word was God." If that is not mind-boggling enough, he adds, *All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.* Not one thing came into being around or outside of Jesus, God's Eternal Word. Not one thing! That gives a whole new meaning to the phrase, *Lord of heaven and earth.*

This is one of the reasons I am not so wild about some of the contemporary language some use in referring to the Trinity, specifically, "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer." I know the intent in using these words is good, but in many ways they reduce the persons of the Godhead to mere functions, devoid of personality and character. For me, at the heart of God's identity is the idea of relationship. A relationship that exists not only between us and God, but especially the relationships that exist between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each with his own role, while simultaneously One. With God it is not just functional; it is personal and relational.

So we can say with John, Jesus is not only a Redeemer; he is God's very Word who, with the Father and the Spirit, brought the whole of creation into being. Now that is a cosmic Christ! Not one thing came into being without him! Indeed, God spoke even you into being. So let me ask you this...is it any wonder that he would seek you out, his precious creation, when you are lost?

To get to that question, I would like for us to jump down to verse 14. I want to keep going with that idea of God seeking us, his precious creations, to redeem us by grace and love. Verse 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.* Once again, so much poetic truth packed into one verse!

We have talked about the Word being one with God, as Jesus Christ, the Son. Now we need to cover the idea of "flesh." I will start by

saying that God created humankind in his own image. We are beautifully and wonderfully made. But to understand the full impact of this passage from John, we need to recognize that we are also fallen and in need of a savior.

In John 8:15 where Jesus says to the Pharisees, *you judge others according to the flesh*, by which he means that they judge with superficiality. In 2 Chronicles 32:8, we find the account of King Hezekiah encouraging his soldiers to protect Jerusalem against the King of Assyria (Sennacherib) saying, *With him is the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us...* So this biblical word *flesh* can carry not only the idea of superficiality, but also human weakness. Elsewhere in the Psalms (78:39) it carries the notion of mortality.²

So this is what the almighty, eternal Word is coming into! Into our superficiality, into our bodily weakness, whether because of age or disease, and into the seemingly insurmountable power of our mortality, the earth's final claim that from dust we were made, and to dust we shall return. Superficiality, weakness, mortality.

This is human flesh now. Beautifully fashioned at creation, but now fallen. Not the Greek ideal of the Olympian athlete, or Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (Superman), or the airbrushed images we find in the pages of our magazines. John recognizes that humankind is in need of help, that youth will always pass away, and that we need a savior.

How does God address this problem? The Word becomes flesh. Not only that, but in the flesh of Jesus Christ we see what human beings were created to be. He is the new Adam and in his character, we see the very character of God the Father, who sends his Son to seek us out, and return us to ourselves.

When I think about this passage, the story of the prodigal son often comes to mind, and I encourage you to think about that story when you think about the Word becoming flesh. By coming into human flesh, God sends his Son out into the "far country" where we reside, fallen and distant from God. Remember the far country in that story is where the prodigal flees from accountability to his father and from his love. In that story, the younger son finally comes to himself and returns home. Even as he approaches the house, his father runs out to embrace him, not waiting for the son to grovel at his feet in remorse.

Again, with God it is personal, relational. It is a family matter. So by becoming flesh, God journeys into the far country of our sin, our rebellion, our superficiality, our weakness, and our mortality, so he might help us live as citizens of his kingdom on earth, and claim our inheritance his children, even after we have run away!

Theologian Karl Barth put it this way, "The flesh which in itself is disobedient, becomes obedient. The flesh, which in itself profits nothing, becomes a purposeful instrument. The flesh, which in itself is lost, attains a determination and a hope. The flesh, which in itself is illogical and irrational, becomes logical and rational. As the Logos becomes flesh and Jesus is flesh, it is shown that this man has and is spirit and life, and the flesh itself becomes quickening and living and meaningful."³

Our historic creeds affirm Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God. At face value, that might seem a contradiction, like having three halves of a pie, or someone being in two places at once. Might not someone also argue it is a contradiction for a just God to show mercy and forgiveness, when his own law for man demands justice be satisfied and punishment be executed for wrongs? The wage of sin is death!

Surely, the only sacrifice acceptable to God for human sin, would be one who is made of flesh like you and me, but, as John says, is *full of grace and truth*, one both fully human and fully God. In the promotional materials for the Faith and Art series this year I included a quote from Christian Art Historian Hans Rookmaaker. He wrote, "Christ did not come to make us Christian...but to redeem us that we might be [fully] human."⁴ That is stated in a provocative way. Of course Rookmaaker wanted people to be Christian in the plainest sense. But the deeper point he makes is in line with the meaning of our passage from John today.

What matters to God is that we live out our calling as his beloved children. We might mistakenly believe that means becoming more godly and less human. Conservatives and liberals might emphasize one or the other of Christ's two natures in their teachings—some emphasizing Christ's divinity, others his humanity.

But Jesus comes neither from the left nor the right. Rather, he comes from above, and shows us how in becoming human, as he did, we can also become more godly.

God did not reject the flesh. He did not reject humanity, even in our fallen state. No, he so loved us, and so loved the world, that he entered into his fallen creation to redeem it in the whole. In taking on our flesh, he restores our humanity. This is not merely a principle in play; this is a person who does this, out of love for us and for his creation. It is the power of his love that makes us both more human, as God created us to be, and more godly.

As you know, last week marked the 50th anniversary of NPC member John Glenn's pioneering launch into space. We are proud to count him as our friend and brother in Christ. We are especially proud to say that the first American to orbit the earth was a Presbyterian! John Calvin would have been so proud.

Anthony Bloom, former Metropolitan bishop of the Russian Orthodox church once recounted a story from that period of history following Yuri Gagarin's return from space. It is said that in the course of an anti-religion speech Nikita Khrushchev exclaimed, "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any god there." There is some debate about whether Gagarin actually made that observation, or if it was just Khrushchev who wished that Gagarin had said it. But one of the priests in Moscow responded wisely, "If you have not seen him on earth, you will never see him in heaven."⁵ John's Gospel affirms that our Lord has indeed been seen on earth, and now resides in heaven.

John writes, at the close of his Gospel, *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this*

book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. How good it is that God came down to us that we might see him face to face, and know his love, from both high above and here below.

May every Presbyterian and believers in every place exclaim with the writer of Psalm 139, *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the [depths], you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

True to his character, “the Word became flesh, and lived among us.” His right hand takes ours, to lead us home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. *The HarperCollins' Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Logos.”
2. *Ibid.*, s.v. “Flesh.”
3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 bk. 2, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 336.
4. H. R. Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 19-20.
5. Dennis Okholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 43.