

Jesus Changes Everything: Advent 2009
The Word Became Flesh
Fourth Sunday in Advent & Christmas Eve/Day

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Jesus Changes Everything: Word Became Flesh

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 1:14

Introduction

Spoken human words are already embodied; they arrive at our ear-gates as sound waves passing from flesh-and-blood vocal chords, triggered by electrical impulses from someone's brain, and vibrating physical structures in our ear canals. Voices speaking to us differ dramatically from voices in our heads. We are inclined to vet all such voices by the tried-and-true standard of in-the-flesh words spoken by real human beings. Absent this assurance, we may doubt the truthfulness of what we "heard," chalking it up to an aberration of our conscious minds or the echo from some long-forgotten dream or a drug-induced hallucination. We'd like to think we can tell the difference between such sounds, and failing this, to get help with those pesky "voices in our heads."

When we say that God *speaks*, it's a bit harder to visualize the physical chain of sounds described above. After all, God is Spirit: an immaterial being without the physical structures found in human beings. True, the Bible often speaks of the "arm of God" or the "mouth of God," but we normally attribute this sort of language to the writers' use of metaphor and its special form, *anthropomorphism*: the conceiving of God in human terms. Behind such picture language is the common belief that God is not really like that, though He chooses to reveal Himself in forms which communicate accurately His character to human persons.

Philosophers are inclined to talk about *analogical* ways of knowing God. Conceding that God's being is unlike our own, these thinkers still want to be able to *know* in some sense who God is. Christian theologians traditionally accept these picture substitutes for knowing God as legitimate expressions, and even as God-approved forms of conceiving Him. The whole idea that God must *reveal* Himself in order to be known has led others to believe that without revelation no such knowledge of God would be possible. Otherwise, human beings are called upon to *think the unthinkable* — an obviously unfeasible approach!

Still, the Old Testament's ways of speaking and writing about God were not troubled by the need for imagery to make sense out of the person of God. All forms of language were pressed into use to communicate the single notion that the One True God exists, that His name is Yahweh, that He enters into covenant with human beings, and that He speaks to His covenant people in ways they can understand. Torah — the ancient book of God's truth — purports to be the revelation of His will *in human language* — *in words*. Throughout the Hebrew Bible Torah and God Himself are largely treated in the same ways. At one point the psalmist declares that God has exalted both His Word and his Name above all other things (Psalm 138:2). But His Word is the means for expressing His Name, and for a Israelite there can be no isolation of one from the other.

All of this leads us to consider the meaning of the profound announcement of John 1:14, namely, "the Word became flesh..." Packed into those few words in Greek (*kai ho logos sarx egeneto*) is an enormous paradox. *The Word who is the Creator has become the creature*. It is one thing to speak of the Word shining as light in the world by giving life to all things; it is quite another to claim that the Word *becomes* a creature within that world. That is the ultimate leap of divine creativity. The Greeks would have questioned the simultaneous *being* of the Word with his *becoming*, insisting that one or the other can be true but not both. Yet that is precisely what John 1:14 declares.

The Fourth Sunday in Advent combines its message with the themes of Christmas Eve/Day in this week's single-verse text from John 1:14. Real human figures comes to the forefront: persons like Elizabeth and Mary whose unborn sons seem to communicate with each other in the womb! These women through their respective offspring tell the story of the Word become flesh. Flesh-and-blood human beings partner with God to bring the Word into the world. The plain truth of Advent shouts from the pages of the prophets and the Gospels: at last the Lord has come and in ways Israel scarcely expected. Though humble in his coming, the Word born as a baby in Bethlehem's manger is the supreme sign that God has returned to Zion.

Note on Resources

In addition to the commentaries cited in previous studies, we include references to four helpful journal articles on this week's verse.

David J. MacLeod, "The Incarnation of the WORD: John 1:14," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 161 (January-March 2004), pp. 72-88.

Hans Ucko, "Full of Grace and Truth," *Ecumenical Review*, 56 no 3 (July 2004), pp. 342-347.

John C. Meagher, "John 1:14 and the New Temple," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 88 no 1 (March 1969), pp. 57-68.

W. Robert Cook, "The "Glory" Motif in the Johannine Corpus," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 27 no 3 (September 1984), pp. 291-297.

This Week's Main Text: John 1:14

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Poetic Form

We'll start with a few remarks about the poetic structure of this verse. Setting it out as poetry, we note the following lines:

ESV English Text	Greek Text
And the Word became flesh, And dwelt among us, And we have seen his glory, Glory as of the only Son from the Father, Full of grace and truth.	<i>Kai ho logos sarx egeneto, Kai eskēnōsen en hēmin, Kai etheasametha tēn doxan autou, Doxan hōs monogenous para patros, Plērēs charitos kai alētheias.</i>

Looked at in this way, the poem offers insight into the key themes. The Word (*logos*) returns to the text after being absent since 1:1, and both 1:1 and 1:14 share some notable parallels. What the writer does is compare the Word in eternity with the Word in time:

The Word in Eternity (1:1)	The Word in Time (1:14)
The Word was (Greek verb to be: <i>ēn</i>) The Word with God The Word was God	The Word became (Greek verb to become: <i>egeneto</i>) The Word among us The Word became flesh

The contrast between the two verses is dramatic, as the writer uses the absolute verb for the Word's existence in 1:1 while opting for the relative verb for the Word's being in the world. The ancient Greek philosophers often spoken of the eternal world of being in contrast with the world of becoming. We are told that the Word shares his existence simultaneously in both worlds.

Became Flesh

In previous studies we have written about the meaning of the word "flesh" as it is used in the Bible. The Hebrew *bashar* and the Greek *sarx* refer to the mode of being human, particularly in its frailty, weakness and mortality. In the Background Notes for February 9, 2008, we made these observations:

Neither Hebrew nor Christian thought saw body and spirit as in direct conflict with each other. Greek culture tended to view the body as inferior to the spirit. Socrates and Plato called the body the "prison of the soul", and counseled that philosophy was the "study of death", that is, the getting rid of the body. Nothing like this appears in the Bible. The body is usually called *soma* in the Greek New Testament, a different word from the term *sarx* which appears in Paul's letters. When Paul uses *soma*, "body", he does not give it a negative meaning at all, but when he uses *sarx* he sees a very different idea. "Flesh" (*sarx*) is the human person in his entirety viewed as weak, frail, and damaged by sin. This is wholly consistent with the Old Testament understanding of human beings as fragile (see Isaiah 40:6, compared 1 Peter 1:24). Jesus affirmed that the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41), while the spirit is willing. So Paul sees the flesh as weak (Romans 8:3), and if we choose to live by its power we will "die" (Romans 8:13). Through Romans 8, Paul consistently contrasts life in the flesh with life in the Spirit, and he does so observing the same distinctions we see in Philipppians.

When John 1:14 declares that the Word *became flesh*, it is asserting more than the Word residing inside a human person or being the companion to a human person. The Greek word *egeneto* is the aorist tense of *ginomai* and refers to: coming into being, factually occurring, happening, taking place, being born, or being done. The New Testament affirms that the Word was born as Jesus of Nazareth to the Virgin Mary. Using language that unmistakably refers to a real birth of a real human being, the key passages disallow any notion that Jesus only *seemed* to become a human being. As noted above, Greek thought elevated the spirit/soul over the body and would hardly have viewed the "coming as flesh" of the Word in a positive light. What theologians call the *incarnation* of the Word as Jesus of Nazareth involves God become a human being as part of God's plan to save the world. Those who disagreed were called *docetics* — based on the Greek word for "it seems" — because they claimed that Jesus only seemed to be a human being in the *flesh*, when in fact he remained only a spirit being. Our key text rejects that position and heartily affirms that Jesus was true God and true humanity in a single person.

On this point, the New Testament speaks with one voice:

Romans 1:3: ... concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh...

Romans 8:3: ... For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh...

1 Timothy 3:16: ... Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

Philippians 2:7: ... but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

1 John 4:2-3: ... By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

The last of these examples reveals the underlying controversy, and reaffirms that Jesus Christ "has come *in the flesh*." Denying the essential humanity of Jesus is every bit as heretical as denying his divinity. When the creed affirms that Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate," it places the incarnation of Jesus within the total framework of Christian belief. If Jesus did not really become a human being, he could not really suffer and die, and, in the absence of those crucial events, the Gospel would be deprived of its saving hope. As Paul taught in Galatians 4:4-5,

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

To be "born of a woman" assured his basic humanity, thus making it possible for him to be "under Torah" and then "to redeem" the captives and confer sonship on the redeemed. This is, of course, at the very center of those texts which tell the Advent story, such as the angel's word to Joseph:

Matthew 1:20-23: ...²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

In order for the Word to be Immanuel, "God with us," he needed to be "conceived" and "born" — fundamental facts prerequisite to "saving his people from their sins."

Through becoming flesh, the Word was now "inextricably bound to human history."¹

Dwelt Among Us

For the writer of John's Gospel, the purpose for the Word becoming flesh begins to unfold with an implicit metaphor. The Greek word translated as "dwelt" is *eskēnōsen* from the root form *skēnoō*, a word which in classical usage means "to pitch tents, encamp, dwell in a tent, settle, take up residence, occupy with tents." The dominant sense pertains to the sort of residence a tent implies. But to a Jewish audience and readership, the implications run deeper. Faced with the fall of Jerusalem and the concomitant loss of the Temple, national Israel returned to a wilderness existence, not altogether different from the forty years of sojourn between Egypt and Canaan. During that period, the dwelling place of God was a simple tent, the Tabernacle, the *mishkān*, which was pitched and packed numerous times throughout the forty years. Unlike the Temple, built first by Solomon, the Tabernacle symbolized the portable character of Israel's national life and the mobility of God who went with His people and *tented* "among them." The significance of this tent image lies in the role which the Word has once he *becomes flesh*: he is the tent where God lives among His people as they travel through their wilderness, as pilgrims on the way to the promised land.

Throughout the Gospels there are hints that, in the absence of an earthly Temple, Jesus becomes Israel's new temple, their renewed dwelling place.² Jesus used language which connected his resurrection body with this new temple (Mark 14:58; 15:29; Matthew 26:61; 27:40; John 2:19). And he asked people to come to him for the sorts of things they ordinarily would seek from the Temple and its worship: forgiveness of sins, confirmation of healing, and the sacrifice. Above all, those who come to Jesus should experience an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. In the last book of the Bible, this symbol reappears with this distinct meaning:

Revelation 21:3: And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

"Dwelling place" has the same *skēnē-* root as found in our text. Later, in 21:22, the vision-revealer tells John that no temple exists in the New Jerusalem because its temple is "the Lord God Almighty *and the lamb*." Those final words give this passage real affinity to 1:14, especially since "lamb of God" language appears in John 1:29 and "the lamb" is directly connected with the worship practices of Judaism.

In the Old Testament story of Israel in the wilderness, God's presence took the form of two symbolic pillars: a cloud and a fire which together framed the entrance to the heavenly temple. Now that a restored Israel has arisen in the world, formed from the remnant of the old one in union with an increasing number of Gentiles, Temple acquires an equally fresh meaning. Not brick and mortar nor stone and column, but human lives are being built together to compose a Living Temple where God comes to dwell through His Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; Ephesians 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5). By his incarnation, the Word, Jesus of Nazareth, becomes God in human form, living among human beings.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *John*, p. 31.

² For additional development of this theme, see Meagher's article cited at the beginning of these *Notes*.

We Beheld his Glory

If we are correct in our interpretation of the Word as "tabernacling" through his incarnation, then the next reference to *the glory* of the Word makes complete sense in light of Old Testament themes. As noted above, the visible presence of God among the Israelites in the wilderness took the form of two complementary pillars: one of cloud during the day; one of fire during the night. Some scholars conceive these pillars as being two aspects of one single divine appearance of Yahweh. During the daytime, when the sun overhead was hot and oppressive to desert travelers, the pillar of cloud served as a protective shield. At night, the same apparatus served to brighten the oppressive darkness, stave off predators (human and mammalian), and warm the encampments formed around the Tabernacle.

Even before the sojourn in the wilderness, the Glory presence of God made itself felt to the Egyptians through the ten plagues which ultimately wore down a intransigent Pharaoh who released Israel from their slavery. The Exodus itself revealed the Glory of God whose pillar of cloud and fire participated in the whole event (see Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19, 24). The Glory which heartened the Israelites, simultaneously terrified the Egyptians. It's hard to miss the power of the symbols in revealing the inner character of God; He is Savior and Judge.

Often, Bible students will refer to the *shekinah* Glory, using the root idea for "tabernacle" which we have examined above, in conjunction with the Hebrew word *kabōd*, "glory." The New Testament uses the Greek word *doxa* to refer to the same idea. We look initially at the Hebrew term.

1. The Hebrew word *kabōd* has to do with what is weighty or impressive and can apply to either God or human beings.
 2. Human beings, because of their wealth or standing, are said to have *glory*.
 3. Applied to God, the emphasis falls on how He impacts human beings by revealing Himself to them.
 4. Through #3, the word comes to mean the essential character or nature of God Himself, whether in His mystery or in His revelation — His perception — by His creation.
 5. The Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible (LXX) chose the word *doxa* to communicate the Hebrew *kabōd*, and by doing so, gave the Greek word a much richer range of meaning that it originally had. Whereas the Greek term derived from the simple verb *dokēō* ("it seems"), through association with *kabōd* the word becomes richer and deeper in communicating the idea of the very reality of God Himself.
 6. Further, there is a physical background of the word *doxa*: it refers to the radiance of the sun.
 7. Thus, the word "glory" has to do not only with a single attribute of God but with "the total nature of God."³
- Of additional interest is the participial form of the Greek verb *doxazō* which means "celebrated." This is consistent with our understanding of *praise* as the celebration of the character of God. Looking at the key New Testament texts, the following distinctive emphases of *glory* appear:

1. Brightness, radiance, and splendor which underscore the *presence of God* (Revelation 15:8; 21:11, 23).
2. Power and strength which underscore the *activity of God* (John 2:11; 11:40; 12:41).
3. Majesty and honor which underscore the *reputation of God* (John 1:14; 17:1, 5, 24; Revelation 1:6; 7:12; 19:1).

As we study the way *doxa* is used in the Johannine writings, some general topics take shape.

1. Father and Son are both said to share in the glory of God.
 - a. The Father has glory (John 12:28; 17:5)
 - b. The Father brings glory to the Son (John 8:54; 12:16; 13:32; 17:1, 5, 10, 22, 24). The beginning of the glory of the Son is at the incarnation, the main theme of this week's study ("We beheld his glory...").
 - c. The Son brings glory to the Father (John 7:18; 13:31; 14:13; 17:1, 4). By what the Son does and say, he reveals the true nature of God the Father. Indeed, the Son makes visible the true character of the invisible God.

³ Cook, p. 292.

- d. The Son does not glorify himself (John 8:50, 54), though his words and deeds exhibit a glory which is truly his own, only insofar as he is himself truly God.
2. The Spirit also shares in the act of bringing glory (John 16:14; 15:26).
3. Other sentient beings within creation bring glory to God (John 9:24; 13:31; Revelation 11:13; 16:9).
4. Those who receive and believe God's Son bring glory to God (John 11:4, 40; 15:8; 21:19; Revelation 1:6; 19:7). When the followers of Jesus "bear much fruit," in terms of their service and witness, God is glorified. Even the death of Lazarus becomes the avenue for glory to arrive in the form of the resurrection.
5. Redeemed creation will declare the glory of God (Revelation 4:9, 11; 5:12; 7:12; 5:13; 19:1).

If glory is the radiant light of God's character, on what does the spotlight of glory fall? A few points are worth making.

1. The Son had glory *before* he assumed his incarnate being (John 17:5, 24), and it seems that many aspects of that glory remained hidden during his earthly sojourn.
2. While those who came to believe Jesus "beheld his glory" (John 1:14), to some the glory was dimmed (17:5), and to still others it was not seen at all (1:5, 9-11; 12:40-41).
3. The glory which was present in the incarnate Jesus was both visible and accessible (17:22; 1:16).
4. When Jesus performed the many signs, he revealed the glory of God (2:11; 11:4, 40), and through these God accredited his work to human beings (8:54), and God also vindicated His own righteousness and truthfulness (7:18; 12:28; 17:4).
5. Through his death on the cross, Jesus also revealed the glory of God (12:23, 28; 13:31-32; Revelation 5:12). Note the irony: that which is a source of *shame* to human beings (death on a cross) becomes the source of supreme *honor* in the purpose of God to save the world. Paul had this in mind when he wrote about the resurrection: "sown in *dishonor*, raised in *glory*" (1 Corinthians 15:43).

The incarnation of Jesus "reveals the glory," therefore, in a variety of ways, as noted above. Though veiled within a human person, Jesus of Nazareth, the Word nonetheless breaks forth in glorious radiance, revealing the true character of God. This occurrence of history was essential, for the nature of God had become obscured by false belief and imperfect representations. Pagans distorted the glory of God through their mythology and graven images. Judaism distorted the glory of God through its traditions and imperfect legal practices. By the time the Word "became flesh," human beings were ripe for a fresh experience of the one true God. As Jesus expressed it:

John 7:28 So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know."

John 8:19 They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

In the first passage, Jesus speaks sarcastically, questioning whether they actually *know him*, and thus, they do not know the one who sent him. From the second text we hear a much stronger version of this, as Jesus emphatically denies that his detractors *know him* or know *my Father*. More importantly, is the converse assertion that "if you knew me, you would know my Father also."

Later, in an exchange with his disciples, Jesus reaffirms his role as the revealer of the Father:

John 14:7-9 7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." 8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Of special interest is the claim, "you do know him and have seen him..." — a statement which prompts the question of Philip. "Seeing God" is in itself a startling claim, for it recalls the warning of God to Moses when the prophet asked "to see God": "No one can see the face of God and live" (Exodus 33:20). In that case, Moses was permitted an indirect vision of God. However, starting with 1:14 and throughout the Gospel of John, we

hear the confident words that by seeing Jesus, the incarnate Word, we glimpse the true nature of God in ways otherwise inaccessible to us.

The Word become flesh and pitching his tent among us means that we see the glory of God in our midst. God comes in glory, not through cloud and fire or lightning and thunder, but in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, starting with his birth as Mary's baby.

Only Begotten One

The underlying Greek, *doxan hōs monogenous para patros*, reaffirms the role of the Word as "glory" but puts a fine point on it: "as the *monogenēs* from Father..." What is the meaning of this Greek word? A full treatment of this word appears in D. Moody, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 72 (1953), pp. 213-219. Its root meaning is "of a single kind." The translation, "only begotten," assumes a close connection between the word and *gennaō*, "to beget." However, as Raymond Brown points out (p.13), this is unlikely. Instead, the emphasis falls on the *utter uniqueness* of the Word in his original person and in his incarnation. Closer in meaning, is the Hebrew word *yāhîd*, "only, precious" as seen in Genesis 22:2, 12, 16 where it refers to Isaac, Abraham's uniquely precious son, but not his only begotten son, since he also had fathered Ishamael.

The text further expands the uniqueness of the Word by modifying *monogenēs* with *para patros*, "from Father." We must resist the temptation to insert "a" before Father simply because the definite article is absent. Recall our discussion of 1:1 and the special way articles operate in the Greek language. Only context can dictate the use of "a" — the indefinite article — since no such grammatical form exists in Greek. Instead, the absence of the article merely throws the emphasis on the nature or character of something or someone. *In this case, the Word derives his utter uniqueness as Son from his unparalleled relationship with God as Father.* The idea of something passing from the Father to the Son is found elsewhere in John's Gospel: 6:46; 7:29; 9:16; 16:27. We also have other occurrences of "only Son" in 3:15-16 and 1 John 4:9.

What we take away from this reading of *monogenēs* is the utterly unique and precious relationship of Jesus with his Father, a relationship which now passes into human form as the Word becomes flesh and pitches his tent among us. Among the "glory" revelations brought by the incarnate Word is the image of that unique relationship of Father with Son — a relationship made available in an equally unique way to those who "receive and believe" the Word (1:12). Though the relationship is unique, yet the Son makes it available to those who are joined to him as his disciples. This is much the same image as we see in John 15 (vine and branches) and in John 17 where the glory of Father and Son becomes the environment for the glory of the disciples who share in it.

Full of Grace and Truth

The idea of "fullness" has connections to both the Hebrew and Greek cultures. Philosophy already contained the germs of what later would be called *neo-Platonism* as well as *Gnosticism*, and these systems of thought spoke about the *plēroma* — fullness of being which expanded throughout the universe. Some Christian theologians attempted a merger of this notion with the concept of God and creation, placing the Word, *logos*, at the fountainhead of the *plēroma*. After all, Paul speaks of Christ as "filling all things" (Ephesians 4:10) and also as the "fullness of God" (Colossians 1:19). But does John's Gospel actually intend us to see these more complex ways of seeing the world in the more direct phrase "full of grace and truth"? We think that the writer moves in somewhat different directions.

The key word in our text is *plērēs*, commonly translated "full, complete, full-grown." It's tempting to accept the implied image of a full-grown human being as the intended use of the term. That is, things like "grace and truth" already existed within Jewish Scripture and theology as prominent ideas. Take, for example, the following passage from the Torah:

Exodus 34:6-7 ⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

The word "abounding" (Hebrew: *rab*) an adjective construct in Hebrew which literally means "great, much, many," stressing the *multiple* and *manifold* nature of what follows. The term is attached to both *hesed* and *'emet*, words which could be translated exactly as "grace and truth," as in 1:14.

Based on reading Exodus 34:6, it becomes evident that John 1:14 does not imply the non-existence of "grace and truth" *before the coming of the Word in flesh*, but instead, the complete opposite. "Grace and truth" already existed in the character of God as revealed to ancient Israel in their Torah. What happened in the coming of the Word was a *maturing* of "grace and truth" within the human family, as God's utterly unique Son revealed the inner nature of "grace and truth" through his incarnation, works and words. Already, *Exodus* teaches us that Yahweh, the utterly unique Yahweh, is merciful, gracious, and slow to anger. Forgiving sin belongs to His true nature, and He has done so for thousands. At the same time, God has judged sin thoroughly. We would expect no less a revelation in the fullness of grace and truth which appeared in Jesus, the Word become flesh and revealing the glory of God.

To borrow a phrase from Paul (Galatians 4:4), the "fullness of times" has brought to us the Word, "the fullness of grace and truth."

What special significance do "grace and truth," as distinct Hebrew ideas, have for us?

Grace

Behind the Greek term *charis* lies the Hebrew word *hesed*, a very graphic expression. We might think of it as the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, furious love of our Father God! When the ancients measured out something, the *hesed* was that part of the overall measure which rested on top of the measure itself. Following the imagery of Psalm 23, it is the cup which flows over, or, as Jesus put it, "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, which will be put in your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). In the Exodus passage above, the word *hesed* occurred more than once, thus emphasizing the overflow. Applied to the life of Israel, *hesed* refers to the covenant love with which Yahweh has graced his people, renewing the covenant again and again, implying that there is more *hesed* on the way! The Hebrew text of Exodus 34 actually repeats the word *hesed*, *hesed*, in much the same way as it repeats the name of God: *Yahweh, Yahweh*. Consistent with *who God is is how God relates* to His covenant people.

But in time, this covenant-love will overflow for the benefit of not only ethnic Israel, but also for the nations. By becoming a human being, the Word announces to the world that covenant-love has started to flow to all human beings.

Truth

Within Hebrew thought, *truth* or *'emet* is not an abstract idea but a deeply personal one. To say that God is *true* is to say that He is *faithful* or that He keeps His Word. It's a bit like that old saying, "To thy own self be true," where "true" means be faithful or consistent. When someone says, "I'll be true to my word," he means that whatever his word *promised* he will surely make good on. By telling us that the Word is "full of ... truth," the writer means to say that in Jesus, the incarnation of the Word, God intends to make good on *all His promises*. Even as the Exodus 34 passage declared, the reliability of God extends to *thousands*.

In Revelation 19:11-13, Scripture brings the themes of faithfulness and truth together in the person of the Word who at last appears with the armies of heaven, leading them to victory over evil and in anticipation that God's will done on earth as in heaven:

Revelation 19:11-13 ¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his

head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

Concluding Thoughts

In a rich outpouring of praise and thanksgiving, the Psalmist crafted words which unite the concepts of "mercy, grace, truth, and dwell" into a single hymn of celebration:

Psalm 85:7-13 ⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. ⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly. ⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. ¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³ Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.

With the arrival of Advent, we at last "hear what God the LORD will speak," for "the Word became flesh." Further, "glory dwells in our land" and "steadfast love and faithfulness" have met in the solitary life of Christ the Lord, born in Bethlehem. As angels sing to wondering shepherds, "righteousness looks down from the sky." As the Christ child bursts forth from Mary's sacred heart, "faithfulness springs up from the ground." When the Word becomes flesh, "the LORD will give what is good." Since the incarnate Word is "full of grace and truth," "our land will yield its increase, righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way." And indeed that "way" leads to "truth and life."

The Readings

In what follows we are dividing the readings from the Lectionary C into two sections, reflecting the Fourth Sunday in Advent and then Christmas Eve/Day, following Proper III which unites the themes of John 1:1-14 with the Old and New Testament texts.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace.

The Psalm: 80:1-7

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. ² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us! ³ Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! ⁴ O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. ⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves. ⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

New Testament Reading:

The Epistle: Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" ⁸ When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The Gospel: Luke 1:39-55

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴

For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

The Prayers

Thematic

O God of Elizabeth and Mary,
you visited your servants with news of the world's redemption
in the coming of the Savior.
Make our hearts leap with joy,
and fill our mouths with songs of praise,
that we may announce glad tidings of peace,
and welcome the Christ in our midst. Amen.

Intercessory

Brothers and sisters,
as we joyfully await the glorious coming of the Christ,
let us pray for the needs of the church, our community, and the world.

Prayers of the People, concluding with:

God of promise,
you have given us a sign of your love
through the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior,
who was promised from ages past.
We believe as Joseph did
the message of your presence
whispered by an angel,
and offer our prayers for your world,
confident of your care and mercy for all creation. Amen.

Scripture

Shepherd of Israel,
you gently support the one who is with child
and call forth the Lamb who dances in the womb,
Stir our hearts to recognize Christ's coming,
as Elizabeth recognized his presence
in Mary's radiant obedience to your desire,
an open our souls to receive the one
who came to love your flock. Amen.

Christmas Eve/Day

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 52:7-10

7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." 8 The voice of your watchmen- they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion. 9 Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10

The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

The Psalm: 98:1-9

Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. 2 The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. 3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. 4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! 5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody! 6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD! 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! 8 Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together 9 before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

New Testament Reading:

The Epistle: Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

The Gospel: John 1:1-14

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Prayers

Thematic

Light of life, you came in flesh,
born into human pain and joy,
and gave us power to be your children.
Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us,
so that all of creation may sing new songs of gladness
and walk in the way of peace. Amen.

Intercessory

May our gracious God,
whose light shines in the darkness of our lives,
the One who formed creation,
now hear the prayers we offer this day for all people.

Prayers of the People, concluding with:

Splendor of eternal glory,
grant that we may be faithful witnesses
to the light that dawns this morning [day],
proclaiming Christ's word of peace and salvation
in acts of justice and mercy. Amen.

Scripture

God,
you spoke and your Word became flesh,
breathing a new song of joy and praise
into the world.

Grant that we may bear the good news of your salvation,
proclaiming your promise of peace
to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Jesus Changes Everything: Word Became Flesh* — Fourth Sunday in Advent & Christmas Eve/Day
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Jesus Changes Everything: Word Became Flesh*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our main text this week is John 1:14. Though brief in its number of words, it is great in what it claims took place. What did it *mean* for the "Word to become flesh"? Compare John 1:1 with 1:14 and note the parallels and also the dramatic contrasts.
2. What key results follow from saying that "the Word became flesh," according to 1:14?
3. Carefully read the following passages, and discuss what they contribute to our understanding of the Word taking on human form: Romans 1:3; 8:3; 1 Timothy 3:16; Philippians 2:7; 1 John 4:2-3.
4. Define the word "incarnation" as it applies to Jesus. According to Galatians 4:4, why is the incarnation so important? Compare this with Matthew 1:20-23.
5. When John 1:14 says that the Word "dwelt among us," it uses a word which literally means "to tabernacle" among us. What images might that conjure up in the minds of *John's* first readers? What was the Tabernacle, and why was it important in the life of ancient Israel? How does Jesus' incarnation fulfill the symbol of the Tabernacle/Temple? Refer to Mark 14:58; 15:29; Matthew 26:61; 27:40; John 2:19 as you consider your answer. What special meaning do you find in Revelation 21:3, 22.
6. What implications does Jesus as the New Temple have for us? Read 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Corinthians 3:6; 6:19; Ephesians 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5.
7. We are told that when Jesus became a human being, "we beheld his glory." How do you understand the meaning of the word "glory"? How did God reveal His glory to the ancient Israelites (Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19, 24)? In what ways did Jesus reveal God's glory through his incarnation (John 1:11; 7:18; 11:4, 40; 12:23, 28; 13:31-32; 14:13; 17:1, 4).
8. "Jesus came to make God clearly known." Discuss that statement, relying on the following passages: John 7:28; 8:19; 14:7-9.
9. This week's text refers to Jesus as the "only Son." In what sense is Jesus "the utterly unique and precious" Son of God? How is that explained in the following passages: John 3:15-16; 6:46; 7:29; 9:16; 16:27; 1 John 4:9.
10. The phrase "full of grace and truth" has its roots in Exodus 34:6-7. Briefly discuss the ways that text sheds light on those words.
11. How does *grace* differ from *truth*? Are these words in some sense complementary to each other? Re-state the phrase "full of grace and truth," using your own words. Feel free to expand on each word as you offer your paraphrase.
12. How does Jesus in his Advent reveal the grace and truth of God? Why are those fitting words for the Advent season, and for Christmas Day in particular? How do our celebrations exemplify them? Detract from them?