

Pastor Melissa Carmack

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Preached @ First Lutheran Church in Aitkin, MN

## **John 1:[1-9] 10-18**

### **Children's Message:**

How many of you enjoy working puzzles? I have brought a puzzle with me this morning called a maze. Each of you will get one of these puzzles to solve. To solve this puzzle, you take your pencil and start right up here where it says, "start," and you try to find an open path in the puzzle that will lead you all the way to where it says, "finish" Of course, you can't cross through any lines. That would be too easy! A puzzle like this can be very difficult – and sometimes it can be pretty frustrating. Traveling through this maze, you will often have to change the direction you are going. You may often find that the path you have chosen leads you to a dead end. When this happens, you just have to back up and start again. When the puzzle gets too difficult, you may need to ask someone to help you. Even though finding the right path that leads to the finish may be difficult, you will have a feeling of satisfaction when you finally reach your goal.

Today is the first Sunday of a new year. We are beginning the year 2014. I believe that God has a plan for each of us for this year. He has a path that He wants us to follow and He wants us to be successful in reaching the goal that He has for us. As we face each new day of this year and try to follow the path that God wants us to follow, we may find that it is a lot like trying to solve one of these puzzles. We may often face difficult choices in deciding what God wants us to do. We may have to make frequent changes in the direction we are going. Sometimes we may find that we have made a wrong choice and we have traveled down a dead end path. When that happens, we have to back up and start over again! Following the will of God for our lives is not always easy, but there is help available. God is always there to help us if we will just ask him to guide us. He even knows what it's like to be one of us! Jesus is God and he came and lived on this earth just like me and you so he gets it, and we can go to him when we need help.

In the book of Isaiah, God told His people, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, "This is the way; walk in it". God is still there! He is still behind us saying, "This is the way, walk in it!" God is there right with us no matter what we do in life.

Dear Lord, as we travel through this year, we ask you to help us to follow the plan that you have for our life. When we don't know which way to turn, help us to listen for your voice as you give us direction. Amen.

## Sermon:

Happy New Year to you all!

Some of you probably were surprised to come into church today and find that the Christmas tree is still up and that we are still singing Christmas carols. For many of us, our Christmas trees are put away in the closet or sitting on the curb. Our decorations are coming down, VISA bills are coming in, and Christmas is fading away. But in the Church, we get one last view of Christmas today. The Church Season of Epiphany doesn't begin until Monday, so technically, we are still in Christmas mode. But more than that, in the Church, we are still reflecting on what it means that Jesus came into our lives one day, so many centuries ago.

Now typically when we hear the story of Jesus' birth, it comes from Luke's Gospel. Luke is the one who includes all those details that we love to hear...the story of a manger and a young couple, and shepherds and Wisemen and angels...it's a glorious story that we never tire of hearing. But today's story of Jesus' birth is a bit different from that. It comes from John's gospel. John's account of Jesus' birth is a much different approach. You see, John begins his account of Christmas with three simple words: In the beginning... In other words, for John, Jesus didn't just start at Christmas; Jesus has always been. "In the beginning..." before there were houses, before there were roads, before there even was a Bethlehem, Jesus was with God. In fact, he was the Living Word (capital "W") of God, and he helped create the world...in the beginning...before anything else existed.

John tells us this in order to teach us that Jesus was God. And this is a concept that is so huge, our finite minds have difficulty grasping it; Believe me...I am both amazed AND completely baffled every time I think about this. Jesus was in heaven, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, but he came down to earth in the form of a human being. He walked among the people. Though he was God, he subjected himself to things like hunger, and thirst, and exhaustion. He was God, but he allowed himself to be insulted, and teased, and tormented. He walked on the earth for 33 years - an earth that he himself had created - and yet most people never even recognized him. That's what John's gospel says: He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.

My first year of college, I had a friend who was out jogging in Como Park in St. Paul one morning when he saw a man in a grey sweat suit get out of a car who was escorted by 2 other men and they all started jogging. My friend continued running behind them for awhile before they went different ways once the path split. Come to find out, it was President Bill Clinton who was in town and went for a morning jog that same morning...in Como park...wearing a grey sweatsuit...escorted by those two other runners. This friend had basically run with President Clinton. He was within inches of the most powerful man in the Free World at the time and he didn't even know it.

That's the sort of oblivious condition in which people of the first century lived. God was in the world, yet the world did not know him...He came to his own people and his own people would not accept him. Most people didn't have a clue. They thought he was wiser than

most. They admired his teaching, and they were astonished by his miracles, but they didn't know who he was. Some said a trouble-maker, others said a prophet; few recognized him as God.

This is how John tells it: He was in the world, yet the world did not know him...He came to his own people and his own people would not accept him...But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

So there were *some* people who recognized him. Some people who believed it was Christ.

And then John says, "And the Word (There's our capital "W" again..which means God)...the Word (God) 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".

John himself saw God...saw Jesus...and he believed. In fact, he became one of Jesus' closest friends and STILL writes in his gospel that Jesus was the real deal...full of grace and truth.

This week, our confirmation students will be receiving this new bible...it's call the message and it's a contemporary rendering of the bible written by Eugene Peterson. Listen to this contemporary reading of this same verse written by John...v. 14.

The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

I love this rendering of this text. I love the image that comes into my mind when I hear that Jesus moved into the neighborhood. The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into my neighborhood! Your neighborhood. Jesus became a neighbor...someone who grew up where I grew up and knew the streets and the parks and the corner store worker of my little town of Bayport where I was born and raised. Jesus was made flesh and blood and knew what it was like to grow up on 8<sup>th</sup> street...spending countless hour playing in the stream that ran through my back yard. He knew what I was feeling when I would run away and sit on the rock that was less than a block away until I would hear my mother call out for me that it was time to come home. The Word- God- was made flesh and moved into MY neighborhood...next door to all of the middle-class working people who were just trying to pay the bills and raise their kids. You see, My neighborhood was nothing special...there was even a drug bust in my neighborhood when I was young. Surely it wasn't fit for the cosmic Word of God...but Jesus moved into my neighborhood anyway.

And the Beauty of this text is that Jesus moves into every neighborhood; from the Aitkin street corner to Downtown Brainerd.. from ghetto projects to suburban mansions, from the streets of South Central to the affluence of Palm Springs, from war-torn Africa to the extravagance of Dubai. The Word, Jesus, dwells with us all, in all of our neighborhoods. And why?? Simply because he loves us.

Before Christ came, people could know God partially. He was distant. After Christ came, people could know God fully because he became visible and tangible in Christ. Christ showed us not only who God is, but also what it means to live fully for God.

Jesus became Flesh for us...lived for us...died for us...and did so in a way that we can say, "Wow! So that what it means to live for God...to fight for justice...to love the unlovable". Maybe, just maybe, we can live a little bit like that too. There will be times when we fail at living as Christ did...and there will be times when we regret actions too. But sometimes, we can become so overwhelmed by God's love...by Christ coming into our neighborhoods and being born for us, that we too can show this kind of love to others.

A couple years ago, I had been volunteering with teen moms in my community...mainly high school students. One of the leaders of this teen mom program had a vision that she would get each and every one of these teen mothers connected with a church in the community, and as a volunteer for this organization, I felt obligated to offer to bring them to my church.

I was nervous. I was not certain how my upper-middle class, proud and conservative congregation would react on the Sunday morning when one of our own teenagers – someone who had belonged to the church her entire life - showed up holding her new born baby boy.

She had hid her pregnancy well. She wore baggy sweatshirts and didn't come around much during her pregnancy. Her mother grew up among those people and probably her mother before her. In fact, the call announcing the birth of her baby was a surprise to me, too. A girl just a few years out of confirmation. And so, I did not know how this would go. How would God's people react to this?

It's not as though I expected a scene. More in keeping with the culture of that place, I would have thought people might simply turn the other way and say nothing at all. Much to my surprise though, when Amanda and her baby, her sister and her mother, walked up the steps into church that Sunday morning, not only did no one flinch, but old women gathered around reaching out their arms to welcome this new little one into their midst. Even without warning or announcement, they passed no judgment whatsoever. They simply loved.

Perhaps it would have been different if this family had not for generations been part of their own extended family there. I don't know. And I don't really know what motivated their welcome. Except perhaps they had seen enough and known enough and experienced enough to know that grace and kindness are really all we have. Maybe they were reaching out with a love they had received first themselves and they knew, in turn, it was simply theirs to share as well.

The Word Became Flesh and dwelled among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.