

Christmas I (C)
December 27, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.
Amen.

After weeks of waiting – all those preparations, parties, shopping, wrapping – after all that, Christmas has come and gone. Of course, the *season* of Christmas, the Twelve Days of Christmas... last until Epiphany on the 6th of January. But the day, the event, has come and gone in a flash.

Christmas Eve, Christmas Day – that's the human story; the story of Mary and Joseph, the story of the birth, of shepherds and angels. But today is the theological version of the story: THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND LIVED AMONG US. Today is all about the INCARNATION: Emmanuel, God with us. *God as one of us.*

But theology is often... obscure, abstract; when what we need is... something, someone we can see and understand. It's like the child who was afraid of the dark. Her parents tried to reassure her, telling her that God would protect her. Finally she says, "But I want God with skin on!"

We, too, want God with skin on. And that's what we get in the incarnation... the Word made flesh. But how can we comprehend such a mysterious idea? Perhaps a story will help. It's told by a famous plastic surgeon, Dr. Maxwell Maltz, author of Psycho-Cybernetics. He tells of a woman who came to see him.

Her husband had been injured while attempting to save his parents from their burning house. He couldn't get to them; they were both killed. Furthermore, his face was badly burned and disfigured. In his grief, guilt, and shame, he had given up on life and gone into seclusion. He wouldn't let anyone see him, not even his beloved wife.

Dr. Maltz told her not to worry. "I can restore his face," he said. But she explained that he would let anyone help him; that he believed God had disfigured him as punishment for not saving his parents.

Then she made the most shocking request: "I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him! If I can share his pain, then maybe he will let me back into his life. I love him so much; I want to be with him. If that's what it takes, then that is what I will do."

Of course, Dr. Maltz wouldn't agree, but he was deeply moved by the woman's total and determined love. He got her permission to try to talk to her husband. He went to the man's room and knocked, but there was no answer. He called loudly, "I know you're there, and I know you can hear me... I'm a plastic surgeon, and I want you to know that I can restore your face." Still there was no answer.

Then he said, "Your wife came to me... she wants me to disfigure her face so she can be like you... in hope that you'll let her back in your life. That's how much she loves you... how much she wants to help you." There was silence... then the knob slowly turned... and the man came out... came out to begin a new life... set free by such love.

And God loves us so much more. So much that *becomes* one of us. The Word becomes flesh... God with skin on!

Yet, most of us, even those of us here... who come to church and who love God... most of us live like children afraid of the dark. We live like we are walking a tight rope without a net... instead of trusting that we are in God's sure and steady hands.

One of my favorite quotes is from a sermon preached by William Stringfellow, an Episcopalian and a theologian. He said: "To be a Christian is to give up our opposition to God's affirmation of our humanity." I suppose that's exactly what we do; we oppose God's affirmation of... us.

What then would it look like if we gave that up; if we... accepted God's affirmation, God's gift? Is there a chance that it would mean

- That we accept forgiveness and let go of guilt?
- That we grow toward our full potential?
- That we learn to love ourselves and love each other?
- That we actually become instruments of peace and love?
- That we live with a kind of gratitude that affects everything we do?

But that, too, sounds terribly theological, I suppose. Frederick Buechner says that "One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God." Affirming our humanity isn't complicated or mysterious. It is really quite simple: ask for God's help to live in response to God's love, one day at a time. Simple, but not necessarily easy, I know.

Nonetheless, it's a matter of accepting the gift of Christmas – GOD MADE FLESH AND COME AMONG US. May God grant us the help we need to open our hearts... and to give up opposition to God's affirmation to our humanity.

Amen.

lml+