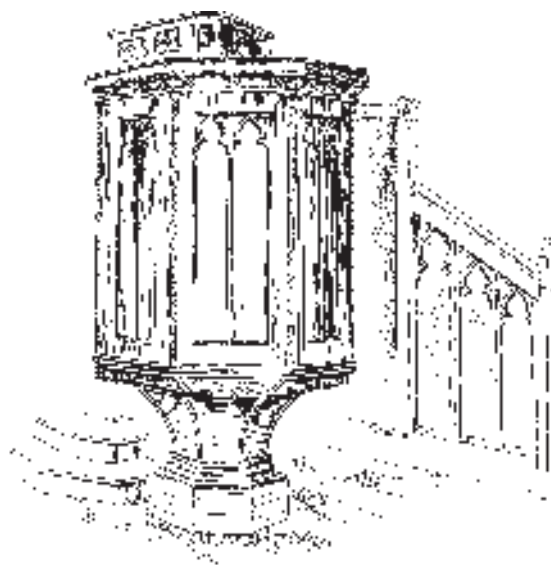


December 20, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### A Hymn with Two Voices

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

John 1:1-18

There are two voices in this extraordinary text from John. The first is a voice chanting, a cantor's voice, a poet's voice, a choirboy's soprano voice before it has changed. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." It is sung, not said; a hymn, not a sermon. It is a hymn to perform surgery with, a heart transplanting voice.

The second is insistent and over earnest, a little nasal. It is a voice that wants to make sure, a voice that's trying hard to get everything straight. It is above all a down-to-earth voice. It keeps interrupting. This troublesome confusion about just who the Messiah was, the second voice says: not John the Baptist certainly, whatever may have been rumored in certain circles. It is a point that cannot be made too clearly or too emphatically. It was **not** the Baptist. It was Jesus. Right from the beginning Jesus was, without any question, who it was.

"In him was life, and the life was the light of all. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," the first voice sings the great Logos hymn.

And, then the second voice again. Yes, it says. Only to come back to the Baptist for a moment. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light; the perspiration beading out on the upper lip, the knuckles whitening. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," the cry soars up to the great Te Deum window, "full of grace and truth."

And, that *is* true, says the second voice. The Baptist made it absolutely clear when he said—I remember the very words he used—“He who comes after me ranks before me, for he **was** before me.” The Baptist said so himself.

It is good to have both the voices. The sound the second voice makes is a very human sound, and you need a very human sound to get your bearings in the midst of the first voice’s heavenly music. It is also good to have the interruptions. There should be interruptions in sermons too: the sound of a baby crying, a hearing aid whining — something to remind us of just what this flesh is that the Word became, the Word that was with God, the Word that was God.

Somebody has to do the vacuuming. Somebody has to keep the accounts and put out the cat. And, we are grateful for these things to the second voice, which is also of course our own voice. It is a human voice. It is the only voice the universe has for speaking. It is a voice with its own message, its own mystery, and it is important to be told that it was **not** the Baptist, it was Jesus—not that one standing over there bony and strident in the Jordan, but this one with the queer north-country accent, full of grace and truth. “Behold,” the Baptist said, “This is the lamb of God.” Not that one, but this one. We need to know.

But, of course, it is the **first** voice that prevails here, and the first voice that haunts and humbles us - that affirmation about the eternal Word becoming flesh. The poem begins with violins and soaring phrases: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...” (John1:1). With these ethereal phrases at the beginning of John’s Gospel, it is no wonder that the church selected, as a symbol for John the Evangelist, the high flying eagle. Now, if John’s poem had ended after the first line, the noble Greek philosophers could have voiced their admiring approval. They, too, wanted to mount up with eagle’s wings, to leave the earth behind, and to ascend into the celestial heights to be with God and his logos, his Word.

But, John’s poem does not end with the first line. The eagle suddenly dives toward the ground. The violins give way to the blunt thud of a bass drum. Heaven crashes to the earth. The opening notes of the hymn fade, and it is time for the first startlingly earthbound announcement in Christian history: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ....” It is here that John and the Greeks part company. The very idea that the ultimate meeting between humanity and the logos of God would come, not when we ascended to the airy pinnacle, but when the logos descended to the fleshy depths was, to employ the term of New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, “unthinkable.” John’s poem, Brown says, does not claim

... that the Word entered into flesh or abided in flesh but that the Word **became** flesh. Therefore, instead of supplying the liberation from the material world that the Greek mind yearned for, the Word of God was now inextricably bound to human history.

The conviction that God refused to float in sublime isolation above time and space, but became in Jesus Christ, flesh and blood, sweat and earth, is the doctrine of the incarnation, and what it means, among other things, is that we do not escape the mundane to encounter the living God. “The Word became flesh ....”

Now the church has always known that affirming this doctrine of the incarnation was like carrying around a lighted stick of dynamite. It is capable of blasting away virtually everyone who prefers less fleshy brands of religion. For those who seek religious experience and inner peace through the inward path of meditation, for example, there is John insisting that the path of God does not end in rarified

spirit, but in flesh. In other words, however many inward turns the path may take, it eventually leads out to the world of flesh, where we are called to meet Christ in human community. We can pray all we want, but it needs to lead to trips to Katrina victims or raising money for the poor by selling Christmas cookies, or contributing to the Helping the Needy fund.

One of the telling criticisms of the electronic church is that it isolates the viewer from the “fleshiness” of human community. As one observer put it, the television church offers religious experience in the safe and sterile environment of one’s own living room and not among “sniffing children, restless teenagers, hard-of-hearing grandparents, and sleepy parishioners.” Moreover, when you watch television church, no one asks you to participate in a visitation program. No one challenges you to hold the attention of a junior high Sunday school class. No one asks you to take meals to shut-ins. In short, it is all pure religion and no messy entanglements with human flesh. All of which is fine until the old eagle John swoops to earth with his announcement: “The Word became flesh ....”

In the movie about Saint Francis of Assisi, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, the birds and all of nature preach their granola-flavored goodness to Francis. In the church’s story, however, Francis preaches to the birds, and therein lies the crucial difference. All of creation was fallen — all of it. To use John’s language, darkness was everywhere. In Jesus Christ, God entered creation, became flesh, and all of the darkness in the world cannot overcome the light of that saving act.

The incarnation means that, appearances to the contrary, all of human life and history is infused with holiness, but this does not mean that life is a lark or that we are called to sing as a hymn the words of the popular song, “Everything is beautiful, in its own way.” Anyone who has seen the torture chambers of the Nazi regime, any surgeon who has removed a malignant tumor, any reformer who has tried to clean up government, knows that every thing is not beautiful in its own way. To affirm the incarnation does not imply that life is rosy or that people always do the right thing or even the best they can. It does not mean that people do not waste their lives, get hurt, or hurt other people. It does not mean that there is no hardship, no drudgery, no evil, no tragedy. It would be an illusion to pretend otherwise.

What it does mean is that there is no corner of experience so hidden that grace cannot find it. There is no soil so sterile that the seed of holy wonder cannot grow in it. There is no mind so hard-headed that the logos of God can’t speak to it and be heard. There is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the light of God which shines in it. Friends, in just 5 days we will once again celebrate the coming of that divine light.

Behold, the light shall shine in the darkness for the darkness has not overcome it!

This sermon has drawn heavily from these three books:

*The Gospel According to John* by Raymond Brown  
*Something is About to Happen...* By Thomas G. Long  
*Secrets in the Dark* by Frederick Buechner