



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas Day Selection III

The Word Became Flesh

[RCL]: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14

*“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on...
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”*

Thus begins John Keats’ poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. In it, Keats celebrates the permanent anticipation of a life quite literally set in stone. Pipes play unheard, unable to be judged. Two lovers stay in an almost-kiss, the anticipation forever building but never accomplished. If anticipation is the best part of any experience, Keats holds, then this painted or chiseled world is paradise: stone, not flesh, immortal, forever in joyous anticipation.

To Keats, it sounds lovely. Never is the bliss over; it is always just about to begin. It is eternal Advent, set in stone, unfading.

On its face, it sounds nice, particularly on this holy night. After all, Christmas has a way of making us nostalgic for the past. We long for Christmases of years past: perhaps when we were younger, or when a certain person we love was still alive, or before a relationship failed. Even children find themselves sad on December 26, because for most of popular culture, that’s when the magic begins to fade, regardless of what the church says about Christmas lasting for twelve days. Yes, Christmas can make us long for eternal Advent, where we are immortal, forever in joyful anticipation.

For all kinds of reasons, Christmas makes us acutely aware of the passage of time, perhaps making us wish that time would stop permanently as it does on Keats’ Grecian urn. This night, we may wish for holy moments past.

Yet tonight, we read the first chapter of the Gospel of John, which, for its part, tells the opposite story of the one about the Grecian urn.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

This is John’s nativity scene. There are no shepherds, no wise men, no stars, no angels singing choruses. There is no dirty stable, no Mary and Joseph. There is only metaphor, reflecting creation as John begins, “In the beginning,” and ending with the eternal God taking on flesh and coming to dwell among humanity.

In this nativity scene, there is only still silence as the Word of God, the eternal, takes on temporal flesh for a fleeting human lifetime. This is why we are here: because God put aside the unfading to join us in flesh. It is, for us, a reminder that Christ came to make our fragile, temporary flesh holy. It is, for us, a reminder that our fleeting time here on earth is holy, too.

Holy, like a church family gathered around a sanctuary on Christmas Eve. Holy, like loved ones gathered around a tree. Holy, like an individual who has, for once, found peace in this world. Holy, like a baby in a manger. These moments do not last forever.

Yet it is in the fleeting that we find the holy. It is in flesh that we experience Christ: in one another, in bread, in wine.

And in becoming flesh, Christ gives us new life, and that which was temporary becomes eternal: not as Keats imagined, in stone, but better: in “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” In Christ, fragile flesh is redeemed and awakened to eternal life.

For now, however, we have only to enjoy these moments while they last. No moment lasts forever, no matter how sweet. We cannot relive our most precious moments forever, and if we could, they would likely quickly lose their shine. The characters on the side of Keats’ urn are as trapped in stone as they are forever in bliss.

We must hold onto these holy moments, wrapped in flesh: holding the hand of someone we love. Kissing a grandchild on the forehead. Laughing until our sides hurt. Eating until we can’t eat anymore. Tearing open presents with our hands. Smelling pine in a Christmas tree or smelling a pie cooking in the kitchen. Crying tears of joy as the family is gathered around. These moments are holy, in part, *because* they are fleeting; we know instinctively that we must treasure them while they last.

After all, these are the moments that we will remember and long for in Christmases future. We cannot hold onto them, but we can remember to cherish them tonight. We can look with love on all who are gathered with us, reminding ourselves that this night is holy and that these people, made holy in Christ, are here to help us celebrate it.

In an age when we are increasingly attached and beholden to screens, tonight, we are called to put down our devices and obligations and live, for this one evening, as enfleshed, whole humans. Our lives are fragile, and these precious, fleeting moments are what make life worth living.

Keats writes: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter...”

Yet surely there are no sweeter melodies than Christmas carols, sung after an Advent of waiting. These melodies are fleeting but full; they are among the sweetest of the year, sung by those we love, in a holy space, surrounded by flesh made holy by the One who has come to dwell among us. They will not last, either, so we must cherish the holy while the music plays.

Beloved, we bring you tidings of great joy: love has broken through again, as it does every year. Christ is born in us again. Love is made flesh again. We are reminded again that we may see and cherish love in whatever ways it breaks through.

We bring you tidings of great joy because God has put on flesh and we are here to celebrate it for another year. So, light the candles, play the melodies, feast on Christ in bread and wine, and cherish these moments and these people.

Because you see, whenever we find love, whenever we enjoy love, whenever we remember love, the holy is born in us again. It’s always there, as close as our next breath; love is here, in the spaces between us. Love is holy. And love is only felt in temporary, fragile flesh. God is made flesh, and flesh is made holy.

The last verse of the Gospel reading reminds us: “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.”

And Keats adds in harmony: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” So ends the famous poem. Beloved, truth has come to dwell among us, and in Christ, beauty surrounds us. Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all we know on earth, and all we need to know. Let us praise the God who came to dwell among us in holy flesh, and let us cherish this holy night forever. Amen.

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