

Sermon
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Christmas Eve 2019

Blessed Be the Body

May our reflections on the nativity story this Christmas Eve lead us ever more into your service, great God of Love. Amen.

The Gospel of John tells us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through the Word, without whom not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us. (*John 1:1-3, 14a*)

Blessed be the body, in which the Word was pleased to dwell. Blessed be the baby Jesus, whose first lullabies were the beating of his mother's heart and the lowing of cattle and whose first word was a wail, the newborn's shock of leaving the womb for the world.

Blessed be the body of Mary, who said yes to the Spirit's creative collaboration. Her womb received the child of God, the longed-awaited, the Almighty One who would raise up the lowly and cast the powerful from their thrones. Her lips sang out the song of her ancestor, and her belly swelled with the growing Promise. In Bethlehem, the sweat ran down her brow as she labored into the night to welcome the Prince of Peace. She gave the newborn her breast and fed the Most High.

Blessed be the body of Joseph, whose calloused hands caught the child of God as he emerged from Mary's body, and who placed him on his mother's heaving, exhausted chest.

Blessed be the body, in which the Word was pleased to dwell.

Our faith story of the incarnation of God leaves no doubt that bodies matter. Flesh and bone and blood are the concern of God, embodied persons the ones God came to save. In fact, bodies matter so much to our God that after the resurrection, we hear tell of a risen Christ who walked and talked and ate and bore wounds of his crucifixion that could be seen and felt.

By God's decision to indwell the flesh, bodies are sacralized. At a time and in a culture where religion is so often spiritualized as a matter of getting our individual hearts right with God, or when faith is measured merely believing and espousing prescribed positions, recalling the incarnation is a critical task for us as Christians.

God at work through humanity to liberate creation is rooted in the Jewish tradition into which Jesus was born. God didn't call out to Moses from the burning bush simply to ask him to remind the people to meditate on Yahweh in their hearts as they broke their backs laboring for the empire. No! God told Moses to tell Pharaoh, the one holding the power to enslave them, to set God's people free! God asked Moses to take an embodied risk to lead the people out of Egypt, and the people to take an embodied risk to follow Moses to the Promised Land. And God's covenant with them was not merely a spiritual directive, but one that laid out community boundaries that dealt with their physical welfare in relationship.

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The incarnation of God as a vulnerable, helpless baby laid in a manger reveals a Holy One who is concerned not only with our spiritual reality but our physical reality. God chose to

reveal Godself through a baby of brown skin born to a poor family in an occupied land. In this act, God signifies particular care for those on the margins of power, and those who are most defenseless or despised.

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Jesus, the homeless infant from the stable grew into a man who revealed his mission as preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the prisoners, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of God' favor. (*Luke 4:18-19*). He healed bodies as he forgave sin, and forgave sin as he healed bodies. He commissioned disciples to heal in his name. He fed the hungry, sat at table with the faithful and the unrighteous alike, drank from the cup of a Samaritan woman, and wept at the death of his friend. When the time came to anoint him for the trials to come, Mary poured oil on his feet, and wiped them with her hair. Later, Jesus suffered torture and the stillness of the grave.

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Not only does providing for the basic needs of bodies matter, so too, does the pleasure of the body. We are meant for joy. The baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloth so that his body once again felt safe and comforted, as it had in Mary's womb. He was born into a tradition of Sabbath-keeping, which reinforced the need for the body's rest and encouraged participation in delight. It was a tradition that passed down the Song of Songs, rich with sensual imagery.

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When Jesus was baptized, the water of the Jordan soaked his skin, and river water dripped down his face as he emerged and heard the Spirit's proclamation of his identity as the begotten Child of God. Our own bodies experience the water and feel the hand that blesses our baptisms. By our baptism we are called into the Body of Christ, a covenantal community to tend not only to our spiritual nature but to the concerns of our whole being.

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The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is a call into care and communion with the whole created world, of which we are a part. Through Jesus, God physically stepped into the creation God had made, to know and to be made known. No wonder the angels sang glorias and the shepherds left their fields to see the baby Jesus. No wonder the star in the heavens shone so brightly that those in another land followed it to present their finest gifts.

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No wonder we bring ourselves here today to find the Christ child and sing with the angel chorus. No wonder we are pleased to present the finest gift of our lives to the One whom we seek, who has already sought out the totality of who we are.

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Gloria in excelsis! Jesus is born!