

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
12/25/05
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

John 1:1-14 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14And 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.

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”
John 1:9 (NRSV)

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESENCE

Do you remember when this part of the world was devastated by hurricane Charley? It's been over a year, but we still talk about it. Our community received an outpouring of money, food and clothing for those who lost so much after the storm.

You need to know that our own church received a grant for \$10,000 from the Presbyterian Church to help us recover from the storm. Members of our congregation were also given financial aid.

I am truly grateful for all the help that we received, but two acts of kindness stand out in my mind. First, our executive presbyter was on the phone the day after the disaster asking what we needed and how she could help. She would soon come to our church to survey the damage and offer her support.

And second, a group of young men from Eastminster Presbyterian Church took time off from their jobs and drove up to help us clear debris out of our parking lot. Their chainsaws and more importantly, their presence with us in our time of need made all the difference.

I read this week about another church, a Baptist church from the Midwest that also answered the call when the hurricanes came. They didn't send money or food or clothing. They sent themselves.

They took vacation days, piled into a dozen pickup trucks and campers and headed to Florida to help. They set up camp in a desperate little town and did whatever needed to be done. They cooked meals, repaired roofs, cleared debris and became close friends with the people in that little town.

Isn't it wonderful the friendships that can be forged when someone is willing to be with us in our time of need? We heard similar stories in the wake of hurricane Katrina.

Total strangers took families into their homes. Churches arrived with food and water for small towns even before the government.

Never underestimate the importance of presence. Never underestimate the importance of being there when someone needs you.

A TRIP TO HAITI

William Willimon told of a mission trip to Haiti. The members of his group brought things that the missionaries needed, things like eyeglasses, medicine and food. They loaded all their supplies into boxes and suitcases and delivered them in person. And then they spent a week working in the center for poor children.

Willimon said that on the night before they were to go home the missionaries said,

“We are so grateful, and the people are so grateful for all the gifts that you brought us. We will put them to good use, as you have seen.

But, we are even more grateful that you came to be here with us. It can get lonely here.

Sometimes we wonder if anyone cares about our work.

Visitors are rare.

And the people say to us when you come down here,

‘We are grateful that the American Christians came to see us, to stand beside us and to stand with us.’”

SENDING THE VERY BEST

Why are we so excited by the Christmas season? In many cases it is because we get to be with loved ones and family. It is their presence that is the best gift of all.

Do you remember that phrase used by the Hallmark Card Company, “when you care enough to send the very best”?

I think that’s a good way to describe what I’m talking about. When a person really cares, they send the very best. They send themselves.

In this season of gift giving and receiving, we remember that God cared enough to send the very best. He sent himself to the world in the form of his Son, Jesus. The Bible tells us that the “Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Jesus was not God’s representative or a messenger from God.

Jesus was God.

That’s what we needed and wanted all along.

Why are we so restless?
Why do we want so much?
Why are we never satisfied?

It is because we are trying to fill a God shaped hole in our life with things that do not satisfy. All our buying and accumulating can never give us what we really need; we need God’s presence.

GOD HIMSELF IS WITH US

Psychologists tell us that a letdown is inevitable at Christmas. No matter how much we spend on ourselves and our children, no one day can possibly live up to the hype. We expect too much of Christmas.

But, I have come to believe that the opposite is true. We are often disappointed with Christmas because we expect too little. The story of Christmas tells us that the “word became flesh and lived among us.” Is that not the best news anyone can hear? Does that not fulfill our deepest longing?

In a church that I attended many years ago we began the service by singing, “God himself is with us.” I loved that opening. We sang the same thing every week, and I never tired of singing it.

It was what I needed to hear.
It is what we all need to hear, this week and every week.
God Himself is with us!

I'm sure many of you have been reading about the fact that some churches have cancelled their Sunday services this Christmas. I can understand why they might want to do that. When Christmas falls on a Sunday, quite often the attendance is very low. Some churches do put on elaborate Christmas Eve services, and this stretches the staff very thin.

But, canceling the service sends the wrong message. Christmas is not about us and our convenience. It's not about creating warm, fuzzy family memories around the Christmas tree. Christmas is about God and His promise.

God himself is with us. Light comes into a dark world. Is that not a reason to meet today more than any other day?

When John tells us that God lived among us it means literally that God "tented among us." God pitched his tent with us.

We have not always had a good relationship with God.
God knows that God tried.

He sent the prophets to tell us the truth. He gave us the Scriptures and the great stories of faith. But, now, in these last days God has gone one step farther. God has come to us. God is present with us through the Spirit of Christ.

There was a song we used to sing at church camp that talked about a "God who didn't care who lived a way up there." Today's lesson tells us (as did that song) that God is not like that. God is not far removed from our problems.

God in Christ knows what it's like to struggle against the cold and flee to another country. In the story of Jesus we learn that God understands the loss

of a loved one and what it means to fear suffering and death. In the story of Jesus we see that the words have truly taken flesh.

For example, Jesus didn't just tell Zaccheus that he cared for him. Jesus told him to come down out of that tree and have dinner with him.

This was typical of Jesus. Wherever he went he offered friendship and forgiveness to the people he met along the way. It is the personal nature of the stories that make them so engaging.

God in Christ didn't just save the world in theory. He saved it in person. Jesus not only talked about wholeness, he also touched the leper. He put flesh on the word "love."

CAME TO SAVE THE WORLD

This is only the beginning of the story. There's more to come. Before we're done this year, we'll learn once again how God in Christ changed everything.

He walked among us. He taught us the truth that set us free. He forgave us. He died for our sins. He raised us to new life even as God raised him from the dead.

If God himself were not with us, we would have never gone down this path on our own. The story begins and the story ends with a God who comes to us, a God who loves us enough to send the very best. God sends himself to our world because he loves us.

In the book of Revelation, in the next to the last chapter we hear the host of heaven say,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them ..."

Rev. 21:3 (NRSV)

That's the beginning of the story.

That's the end of the story. That's the whole story.

One commentator wrote,

“The Revelation to John depicts the last scene of the divine-human drama as a redeeming of this world by God. This is not so much a picture of heaven, of some other-worldly place.

It is a picture of the world made right, creation at last completed as God wills.

At the end, in Revelation, the story ends not with our being moved to some other world, but rather with the Kingdom of God, the heavenly city descending to this world, with this world renewed and redeemed. This world is important to God.”

That's what John wanted to emphasize in his gospel, that God loved the world so much that he sent his son into the world. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16)

That's the point of our worship every week. And it's why we don't miss even one Sunday. We need to hear this every day of our lives.

When we read in Revelation that God's “home” is with us, it's the same word John uses to describe the coming of Christ. From creation to Christ to the last days the story is the same. Remember that nostalgic old song, “I'll be home for Christmas.” The message of the gospel turns it around. Christmas brings home to us. Our deepest longings are filled by God's presence.

The gospel is not a story about how we discovered God. The gospel is a story about how God came down to us. Our destiny is not that we should

ascend to some other world. Our hope is that God should descend to our world and by descending redeem this world forever.

DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM

The Bible tells us that when God first came in Christ his own people didn't recognize him. (John 1:10) I wonder if we might be in danger of making that same mistake today. We say that we want to be close to God. We even complain that God doesn't speak to us enough.

But, I wonder if that's really true.
Maybe God does speak to us. We just don't know how to listen.

We don't recognize God because God still comes to us in such small, soft ways. Jesus was (as we sang in our special for today) a dear little stranger when he first came, and he is still a stranger to the ways of this world even today.

We are such creatures of the dark that light hurts our eyes. Like those religious leaders of old we expect something different. If there are no large crowds and no great shows of success, then we can't understand how God could be at work.

And perhaps, deep down inside, we worry about God getting too close to us. We rightly suspect that if God is with us here and now in a very personal way, then things will have to change with us. And that is never easy.

That's why Jesus was rejected long ago, and that's why people reject him even today. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus define God in a very concrete way. And when it comes to God, people quite often don't want a clear definition.

They say that they want to be more "open" when it comes to God. And that means that they want to answer the God question in their own way instead of

having that answer imposed on them from upon high. People can wax eloquently about loving god as long as it is a god of their own making.

From the Christian perspective, the birth of Christ made that kind of speculation obsolete. If God was in Christ, then Christ is God. Christ is the epitome of Who God is and what God wants, and that leaves no wiggle room for those who would create their own god.

The God who created the heavens and the earth has come to earth in Jesus. The word became flesh, and lived among us. And that light still shines in our darkness.

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

Jesus tells us that we need to become like a little child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. With that in mind, let me tell you the Christmas story as a child told it.

"She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them with slow solemnity, convinced every word was revelation. She said,

"They were so poor they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat and they went a long way from home without getting lost. The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside the lady.

They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass (hee-hee), but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lighted the roof. Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them.

Then the baby was borned. And do you know who he was?"

Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars. "The baby was God."

And she jumped in the air, whirled around, dove into the sofa and buried her head under the cushion, which is the only proper response to the Good News of the Incarnation."

(John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected*, p. 68.)

Friends, hear and believe the good news, "God himself is with us."
Let us welcome the light of life into our lives today.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN