Incarnate and Eternal

One of the strangest, most mysterious doctrines of the Christian faith is the belief that in Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth as a baby in a stable in Bethlehem we celebrate in this season, our Creator, the God of Abraham and Sarah, became a human being. The Apostle Paul wrote that he "proclaim(ed) Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles," and indeed the idea of God executed as a criminal seems absurd to non-Christians even now. But the concept that most radically divides us from our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters to this day is the idea that, in the words of Bob Marley, "the Mighty God is a living man." But although in our kindness and humility and desire to respect the beliefs of others we may shrink from divisive ideas, the fact is that this troublesome concept is key to the heart of our faith. If it had been just another baby boy born in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago, we would not have the reason to celebrate his life, work, teachings, death and resurrection. But neither would Jesus have the meaning for our lives that he does if he had been some sort of divine apparition and not fully human. We find in the prologue to the Gospel of John both the culmination of a strand of Jewish thought on how God directly touches God's creation and a radically new pronouncement of incarnation. And it is through our celebration of Christ Jesus as both eternal and incarnate that we discover the meaning, the calling of faith in Jesus on our own lives.

In my selection of readings from the Revised Common Lectionary this morning, I've paired what is probably a very familiar set of verses for most of us with a reading that most of us will find quite unfamiliar. A few words of explanation about our first reading are probably in order. The book referred to in our pew Bibles as Sirach, or to give its full title, "The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach," was written in Hebrew at about 180 b.c.e. by a teacher of wealthy boys in Jerusalem – sort of a Jewish "Mr. Chips," if you will. It is a book of instructions and proverbs that would have been very much in tune with the prevailing religious and cultural wisdom of the time; the sort of "Give glory to God and behave yourselves" lessons that religiously observant parents always want their boys to hear. The book was translated into Greek for a wider audience by the author's grandson in Alexandria, Egypt, in about 132 b.c.e., at a time when Alexandria was a great center of Jewish learning and most of the educated people in the known-world read Greek. Over time, Hebrew manuscripts of the book disappeared, which had a direct impact on its history with the Christian Church.

Jewish scribes and scholars revered the book and continued to use it up until the eleventh century A.D. It was then that the Council of Jamnia made the decision to limit the Jewish Bible, or Tanakh, to only those books that had been written in Hebrew. Since Sirach had survived only in Greek and its Hebrew origins had been forgotten, it was dropped from the canon of the synagogues. But the Christian Church, both in the West and in the East, continued to use the book, which had become known in Christian circles as Ecclesiasticus, "the Book of the Church," due to its wide use in ethical teaching. The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach had been quoted in the Epistle of James and in the writings of many of the most influential Church Fathers, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Ambrose and Augustine.

So, why isn't this book in most of our Bibles? Well, if you grew up Catholic, it would be. Those of us who grew up Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterian or in some other Protestant denomination, however, follow the example of the Father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther. Luther apparently decided that the Council of Jamnia knew what they were talking about in terms of canonicity of the Jewish Scriptures and so, in an effort to restore the Church to its

primitive purity, he dropped Sirach and a number of other books into a category called the Apocrypha, or "hidden" books. Later scholars have cast serious doubts on this decision of Luther as very early Christians and even Jesus himself seem to have used some of these books as Scripture.

That's a long way of saying that it's OK for good Baptists to read from Sirach in worship! But it's a necessary preparation for pointing out how John was taking concepts familiar to first century Jews and restating them in light of the life of Jesus. In saying, "In the beginning was the Word," John was not saying anything startling. He is merely referring to an idea that we find in Sirach, in another book relegated to our Apocrypha called "The Wisdom of Solomon," and in the more familiar book of Proverbs and even in Genesis. In these Scriptures, the activity of God's creative power is attributed to God's Wisdom or spoken word. We all know that in Genesis, God spoke and things came into being. The repeated formula is "God said, 'Let there be…' and there was…" Later in the Scriptures, we find the personification of the Wisdom of God accompanying or assisting God in God's creative work. In the Wisdom of Solomon we find this: "With you is wisdom, she who knows your works and was present when you made the world; she understands what is pleasing in your sight and what is right according to your commandments." In Proverbs, Wisdom says of herself, "when God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker."

As Jewish thought moved from being expressed in Hebrew to Greek, the concept of Wisdom (Σοφια in Greek) was also connected with the idea of Word or Λογοσ. In the Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2, we read "O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who made all things by your word, and by your wisdom have formed humankind…" Λογοσ and Σοφια, Word and Wisdom, are the same. The great Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria who lived at the same time as Jesus and John, called the λογοσ, "the tiller with which God, the Pilot of the Universe, steers all things." Moreover, the Targums, translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Aramaic which were completed around this same time, used the phrase "the Word of God" as a substitute for the unpronounceable name of God. For John's original audience, the phrase "the Word was God," was a simple truth. They understood the Word and Wisdom of God to be the way in which God impacted the world which God had created.

Now, I cheerfully admit that all of this is somewhat esoteric, interesting mostly to those of us who are fascinated with languages and the history of philosophy and theology and things that have very little impact on everyday life in the real world. In other words, "So what?" Those first verses of John's Gospel might be little more than an elevated sort of retelling of the story of creation, a poetic praise to the Creator much like the Psalms, only written later. But in the fourteenth verse, everything changes. The great preacher William Barclay called verse 14 "the sentence for the sake of which John wrote the Fourth Gospel": "And the Word became flesh, and lived among us…"

Now John is claiming radical things, at least two radical things. First, that the man Jesus, the son of a poor family from Nazareth, born under suspicious circumstances, is in fact the creative energy of God on earth, the Word and the Wisdom. Jesus is the eternal One. This Jesus, according to John, is the embodiment of God's grace and truth, the fullest and truest revelation to humankind of God Godself. From this point forward in the Gospel according to John, the reader

or listener must understand every word that comes from Jesus' mouth as having the very authority of God. Jesus is not one who studies and interprets the revealed words of God; he *is* the Word of God. For those who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God, to join him as heirs of the Kingdom of God, participants in the Beloved Community.

In saying that the Word has become flesh, John is also proclaiming the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel. Jesus is Immanuel, God with Us. Jesus is both eternal and incarnate. No longer do God's people have to conceive of a God behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, no longer do they have to wait for God to come down from a heavenly throne. God is right here. Sr. Joan Delaplane writes, "No longer can we say that our God could not understand what it's like to struggle against the cold, to have to flee to another country, to be betrayed by a friend, to grieve the loss of a loved one, to fear suffering and or death, to experience a seeming absence of Abba. No, our God has truly walked our walk; God's Word of Love has truly taken flesh."

John uses a wonderful Greek word in verse 14 that English has flattened out into "lived among us" in reference to the place of the Word become flesh in our lives. The Greek is κατασκηνο and it literally means "he pitched his tent with us." It recalls the similar phrase in Sirach, "Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance."" It also calls to mind the way that God was said to have lived in the midst of the traveling Israelite encampment during the Exodus, in a tent reserved for the Divine Presence. It is symbolic of God's presence with God's people when they are on the move, in danger, living rough, preoccupied with just staying alive in a world full of trouble. That is when we most need God to be with us, when our lives are like rough campsites with no amenities, when survival is a struggle. And that is how God chooses to be with us; in a tent, sharing our difficulties, ready to go with us in the wilderness.

John says of this incarnate God who joins us in our tented community that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son." There is another word play here, this time in Hebrew. According to Roger Hahn, "In Hebrew the verb "to tent" was shachan, which was a cognate of the word shechinah -- the word often used in the Old Testament for the glory of God. The root idea of shechinah is the presence of God - that is the meaning of glory. It was in the becoming flesh and in the tenting experience of Jesus that we saw God present and at work. That was true in the Incarnation; it has always been true of the God of the Bible. He is especially present in the hurting, rejected, and rough edges of human life." The glory of God is revealed in God's care for us needy humans.

Not only is the Incarnate Word, Jesus of Nazareth, the revelation of grace and truth according to John but "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." Many commentators point to the relationship between the New Testament concept of grace and the Old Testament idea of *hesed*, God's steadfast love and faithfulness. The great British Baptist scholar George Beasley-Murray, whom I was privileged to hear teach on this text, has written that the Greek construction of "grace upon grace," "appears to indicate that fresh grace replaces grace received, and will do so perpetually." Jesus, the eternal and incarnate, brings into the midst of our rough lives love

that is inexhaustible. God does not come down to us with the fire of destruction but with the fire that lights our lives and warms our hearts – the fire of love.

As a boy, I loved the imaginative and inspired fiction of Madeline L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time. I'm so glad, as an adult, to be discovering her other work, including this poem on the incarnation, entitled "The First Coming:"

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time,
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait
till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Truly, we should rejoice in the presence of the incarnate and eternal. John Shea tells a wonderful story of a small girl who understood that inescapable fact: "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."

I would say that that sort of joyous, ecstatic worship is indeed the only proper initial response to the Good News of the Incarnation but I believe that another more complicated and strenuous response must follow. For in the act of incarnation, God has not only come down to us but God has also reminded us that all humankind is made in the image of God. Truly only Jesus among human beings was God but in each human face we are called to see the image of our Creator, the one whom Jesus called Abba, Papa. And if we answer our calling to see the traces of the incarnation in each face, then how can we pass by the homeless and the hungry? How can we

allow bombs to rain down upon civilian homes and soldiers to rape and pillage in war zones? How can we allow ourselves to hate our brothers and our sisters for any reason at all?

For though the Resurrected Christ ascended into heaven, although Jesus the Incarnate One no longer walks among us in the flesh of his Bethlehem birth, the incarnate body of God is still among us. We call her the Church and we are her members. Now it is our task to bring Good News to the poor and comfort to the afflicted. As we remember symbolically this morning the enfleshing of God with bread and see the spilling of Jesus' blood in the redness of the grape, let us remember the incarnation that must happen in us, every day. In the words of Theresa of Avila:
"Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ's compassion must look out on the world.
Yours are the feet with which
He is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which
He is to bless us now."
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.