

“God of Creation and New Creation” based on John 1:1-18 and Isaiah 43:1-2, 15-22
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 2, 2022 at Shelby Presbyterian Church

We all know these words of scripture: *“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelled, (or pitched a tent, made a tabernacle) among us, and we beheld His glory, a glory as of an only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

These words from the prologue of John’s gospel are among the most beautiful in scripture. They are also among the most familiar and so, they are often taken for granted. But I want you to know that these words are not merely part of a beautiful poem, or even a dense theological statement that needs to be unpacked, but a straightforward reason why the person and work of Jesus, the story of this man who died on a cross and rose again, truly is good news for you, and for me, for all of us.

On Christmas Eve, Richard Hart shared with me a story that he loves to explain this. He said he heard the story of a grandfather who one day went to see his grandson. When he got there, the toddler was in timeout, confined to his playpen. The grandfather asked to take the child out so he could play with him. The mother said no, he had to stay in the playpen. And so, the grandfather, without missing a beat, climbed into the playpen himself, to be with the child. This is what the Word becoming flesh looks like, that God has entered into our humanity, into our confinement, to be with us.

I love another illustration of this text which comes from the book *Blue Like Jazz*, in which author Donald Miller describes a story relayed to him by an old folksinger. The story was of some Navy SEALs sent to rescue hostages in a foreign land. These hostages were trapped in a storage container, in the dark, and the SEALs broke open the container to free them. The light rushes in, but they stay where they are. But the hostages refused to move – they huddled together.

The armed military personnel urged them to get out, but they did not listen, only cowered in fear. That’s when one of the SEALs took off his protective helmet, and his protective vest. He laid down his weapon, and then crawled into the huddle with the hostages. He became like them, shared their perspective, and led them out to freedom. They trusted him enough to follow him out.

The soldier could have waved around his weapon to hurry the hostages. He could have started pulling the people out by force. But in this, he would have only acted as their captors had. So, instead, he humbled himself in love and compassion. This is another example that can shed light on what the incarnation means.

Now, there is no analogy that can fully grasp or explain the divine mystery in today’s reading. If I tried to line them up as analogies, I’d surely end up flirting with some heresy. Yet they give us a flavor and my hope is that these will help you understand why this mystery is so important. You see, what John lays out from the start of his gospel is a connection between

the creation described in Genesis and a new creation, one inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, by which the one through whom all things were created, the Word, the eternally and only-begotten God the Son, who is fully one with God the Father, became fully one with our human flesh, and made a dwelling, pitched a tent, or literally, built a tabernacle, a meeting place for God, and humanity.

In the first lines of Genesis, from out of nothing comes creation, *"In the beginning, as God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was in chaos and empty, and darkness was over the face of the abyss, and God's Spirit was brooding over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light and darkness."*

John echoes these words in what he writes, but at the same time, he weaves in Isaiah, through the presence of John the Baptizer, the one who witnesses to the light, the *'one who cries out in the wilderness, make straight the path of the Lord.'* John the gospel writer is telling us that God is doing a new thing, just as the prophet Isaiah promised in our reading today. The God of Creation is bringing forward a new creation, built on the foundation of a gift we do not deserve, namely that God's Son shared in our life, and died for us, only to rise again for us, so that we might inherit what is his, a life that is abundant now, and eternal.

My sisters and brothers, this is the love of God for you plain and simple. The God described in John and Isaiah is not a God who is distant and aloof, hard to approach, but one who is active and involved, present and generous to us, his children. We are not children by blood, as if our lineage makes us God's. Nor are we children by flesh, by the accomplishments of our life. We don't earn God's love. Nor are we children by human will, by our own choosing, as if I'm going to make it so. Instead, it is God's own sharing in our humanity, and God's pursuit of us to give us new birth, that make us born of God.

John's description of who Jesus is in this passage today, is about God coming down to us. It's about God's incredible, relentless, never-ending, all-encompassing, merciful love of God. This is the love of a God who made you to share in the image of God, giving you and I the divine traits of love, creative agency, and freedom. This is the love of a God who never stops loving us, even when we love false gods, misuse our power to create, and use our freedom to rebel, rather than listen. This is the love of a God who always pursues you, waiting for you to turn back to Him and enter into a loving embrace.

My sisters and brothers, the One True God, as revealed by John and by the prophet Isaiah, is the God of creation and the God of New Creation, who is the source of all things, the one who sustains all things, and the one who restores all things. Our God says to each of us, *"Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."*

You are God's beloved. Your job and mine is not to earn God's love, but to respond to it, with the confidence that like God, we can be humble. We can love others, not because they have earned it, but because they too are beloved by God, made in God's image just like us.

Here we are at the start of a new year, still mired in a seemingly never-ending pandemic, and while I still cry out to God asking for this to end, lamenting the pain it has caused, at the same time, I am reminded by these passages, that God comes down to us. God is not distant. I may not understand why our God does not just unilaterally fix everything. That sure would be great. But what I do know is that this is the same kind of world, filled with pain and disease, with sinful powers and systemic sin all around us. This is what God entered into, taking on our flesh, to build a tabernacle among us, 2000 yrs ago.

This grace and truth, this calling on our lives, is meant to empower us in this world. Our job is not to dominate, but to follow our Lord, who walked with us, in our shoes, literally. As we look to the promise of this year ahead, I pray we walk in our community, and reveal the presence of God with us, the good news, to all we meet. Again, not by pressing them into believing exactly what we believe, or to live as we live, with preconceived notions of what we think needs to be done.

Rather, we must approach with the expectation that with the people we serve and serve with, we will see the gifts God has already given this community and know where the Spirit is leading us. Remember that grandfather in the playpen and the soldier huddling up to build trust. God is doing a new thing here in Shelby and here in this church.

We need to know that we are called to be a part of it, empowered because God loves us already. We must make room in our hearts, shedding what we think it means to be active in this community, and do as God does – Listen. This way we can be faithful as God is faithful and ready to let the Spirit of God guide us so we can truly be a part of the new thing God is doing here in this church and in Shelby. Amen.