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"The Presence of God"
John 1: 1-14
December 30, 2012
First Presbyterian Church

Allister was about 2 or 3 years old, and we decided it was a good day for cleaning. We were all in the living room, and we told him that he needed to go clean his room. He pouted, but he eventually went. After a little while, we checked in and saw little improvement. We restated our expectation and let him be. A little while later, we returned and once again found little change. In fact, like most kids, he had become distracted and was playing.

This time, we made sure we clearly stated our expectations, "Son, put the books on the shelf, gather your toys, and put them in the correct bins." Well, the tears really started to roll, but we left feeling confident that he knew what to do. After a few minutes the tears stopped. We continued with what we were doing in the living room knowing that he was on task because we had clearly explained to him what to do. About 15 minutes later we returned to find him looking through books rather than cleaning. That is when we decided we needed to sit down and help. As we sat there, we picked up a book, handed it to him, showed him where to put it, and then he put it on the shelf.

Now, one thing you have to know is that Allister really likes books so we were talking about 50+ books that needed to be put back on the shelf. After slowly going through the motions of handing him each book, pointing to where it should go, and watching him put them up, we started on the toys.....we kept sitting there and guiding him....trains here, stuffed animals there. Finally, he got it; he understood.

As I reflect back, I thought the first statement made sense, "Son, go clean your room." Then I just knew the second clarification would do, "Son, put the books on the shelf and the toys in their bins." But none of that worked. He sat there in his floor in tears feeling like the task was too great. Do you know what worked? It was when we got down in the floor on his level and worked with him to truly make sure he understood what to do....to walk him through it one book, one toy, one stuffed animal at a

time. He finally understood when we got down on his level.

Emmanuel, God with us.....today's scripture tells us of the word becoming flesh. Now, the fancy word for this occurrence is the incarnation – the moment when God became fully human yet was still fully God. *The incarnation is the moment when God established a human bond with God's creation. With this bond, God was no longer distant, God was no longer isolated, God was no longer remote, - rather, through Jesus Christ, God chose to come down on our level and to truly be with us and live with us in the midst of human weakness, confusion, and pain* (New Interpreters Series). God came down to sit in the floor with us as we cry out in frustration because we do not know what to do.

A few years ago we had a Sunday school class that studied from the curriculum The Advent Conspiracy. Some of the main premises of this curriculum were to spend less at Christmas, give more, and worship fully. Listen to these thoughts from that book: *Our world is increasingly fractured, yet we often mask the distance this causes with a kind of pseudo-community – we send cards, we call, we email, we Facebook, we tweet, and the list goes on. These can be important ways to keep in touch, but they can never replace the flesh and blood aspect of a relationship. We need to be with each other. To hear another voice, to see another face, to hold another hand.....it is one of the ways we are reminded that we are not alone.*

When we make time to be with someone it is a gift – a relational gift. Think about the worst present you ever received. More than likely it didn't fit, it was the wrong color, or it was something you did not enjoy doing. It was an obligatory present. Hmmm....I need a present for a boy so let's get him a _____, and you fill in the blank with a stereotypical boy toy. On the other hand, when you take the time to find out that the child likes to draw so you get a sketch pad, or the girl collects butterflies so you get her some butterfly stickers.....it is a more meaningful gift because you took the time to get to know the person.

God in his infinite wisdom sent us the ultimate relational gift....the presence of God in the form of Jesus Christ to live with us! And so it came to be that the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Let's pause and look at some of the symbols in our beautiful sanctuary....the stained glass, the trinity of circles on the pew racks in front of your knees, the silhouettes on the chandeliers. Now, let's look at the table. It has two candles that we light each week to remind us that Jesus Christ is the light of the world and that wherever two or more are gathered then Jesus Christ is with us! The table is also set with the Bible, God's word. It has been here for 3 or 4 straight weeks, and then next week it will be replaced with a loaf of bread, the body of Christ. Then Pastor Dave will stand here. He will take the bread, bless it, break it, and he will give it for all to receive as a reminder that the word became flesh as we participate in the sacrament of communion.

Now God is all powerful, so God can do some amazing things with lights, fire, and multitudes of angels. So God could have come down in a glorious white chariot or golden escalator, but you know what? God came in the form of an infant. Think about that. When the word became flesh....when God became fully human....the form that was chosen was a baby. I know from experience that a baby can control a whole house, but in all honesty, it eats, it sleeps, and it poops. With that being said, a baby cannot feed itself nor can it change its own diaper. It is solely dependent on its parents. So the son of God, Jesus Christ, God's earthly being, was solely dependent on Mary and Joseph.

We have all had guests stay with us. Imagine if the angel said, "You will have a visitor. You will host the son of man." OK.....you clean up, dust, and cook a good meal. No, not here. When the word became flesh it became human in its most vulnerable state, an infant. The son of man - God in human form had to have his every need tended to. Why? Why not a chariot? Why not a golden escalator? Why not step out of a burning bush? Because if God came down in a glorious fashion could you relate? The answer is no; we would not be as connected. We would not be able to relate. It would be like trying to relate to a movie star.

I believe that when God decided to come down here, he chose the unlikeliest of places....a stable as an infant. But by masterful design, the word became flesh and dwelt among us in the form of an

infant so that baby would grow up with us. Think about your best friends; they are people you spend time with, you grow up with. When God decided to come down here, he wanted to get down on our level, to sit in the floor with us and help us. That way, He would grow with us, and we would really get to know him. We could really relate. And that is what He did.....when the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

When discussing this topic with Pastor Dave a couple of weeks ago, he reminded me of the following: *This is what makes Christianity so unique: not just adherence to an 8-fold path (the Buddhists), or the sacred written Koran, or the abstract writings on tablets of stone (the Torah); but with Jesus, it is "Come with Me," "Receive Me," "Love Me," "Watch Me," "Learn from Me." It's all about a personal relationship with God. The one-to-one encounters between Jesus and the leper, Jesus and Zacchaeus, Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus and the woman at the well, - these stories are preserved so that we might see ourselves in their place.*

Now we are all fairly familiar with what happens next. Jesus Christ grows up with God's creation, he ministers, he is turned over to the authorities, he is hung on a cross, and on the third day he rises from the dead. Fifty days later God sends the third part of the trinity (the Holy Spirit) down to earth during Pentecost to dwell within us! When we accept Jesus Christ, I believe our hearts become filled with the spirit. And every time we extend kindness, express love, and give respect, the word becomes flesh. The incarnation happens from believer to believer.

- When you pick up the "Pink Sheet" and call or send a card to someone listed on there then the word becomes flesh.
- When you enter the Brotherhood Sunday School Class and receive a handshake from everyone inside then the word becomes flesh.
- When you gather with other youth over at the AOC to play silly games and have a devotional then the word becomes flesh.
- When the Friendship Class gathers in a circle hand in hand at the end of each class

to pray as a group then the word becomes flesh.

- When you see a visitor and greet them and show hospitality then the word becomes flesh.
- When people gather on a Saturday to pack food baskets and deliver them across the city then the word becomes flesh.
- When your financial giving provides for a space where men, women, and children can come and receive a hot meal then the word becomes flesh.
- When you gather for study on Wednesday mornings, at Theology on Tap, in Sunday school, at the disciple studies then the word becomes flesh.

I have also seen the incarnation happen away from here. Think about the person who held the door open for you at the store, the person who let you merge in front of them in traffic, or the person who saw you only had 2 items and let you check out ahead of them. Then the word becomes flesh. Every time we extend kindness, every time we express love, and every time we give respect, the word becomes flesh and dwells among us. The incarnation happens from believer to believer.

One of my favorite ways I have seen the incarnation happen from believer to believer happens like this.....

Each year, we gather as an extended family on Christmas Eve. Mikey's family, my family, and old friends are all there. There are usually 20+ people there with food and laughter. About 9 o'clock, all of the women begin to prepare to continue a tradition that has been going on for 20 or more years. They all gather their jackets, make sure all are ready, and get in one minivan or large SUV that will hold all 7 or 8 of them. Meanwhile, Janet Dahlke (Mikey's mother) prepares the card. Nothing fancy, just a regular Christmas card. She then writes in it, "God cares about you!" Then she stuffs it with \$100 and seals the envelope. The women then drive down Highway 58 which is very similar to Madison St. They look for someone who is out or someone who is working on Christmas Eve. The rules are simple. Rule number 1: All of the ladies must agree on who receives the envelope. One year it was a cop and one year someone

washing clothes at the laundry mat. Who will it be this year? After driving around for 15 or so minutes, they decide it will be the young lady working at the convenience store. They pull up and park. Rule number 2: The youngest and newest members on the trek get out to make the delivery. They walk inside the store, hand the envelope to the young lady, and say, "Merry Christmas." They then turn and walk away. I love the tradition of passing on the incarnation with an act of kindness and the message that "God cares about you!"

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Glory Be to the Father, to the Son, and the Holy Spirit!
