

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/25/2008, Christmas Morning  
John 1:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and *dwelt among us*, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.(John 1:14, RSV)

Love means that you are willing to dwell with others, even in humble circumstances.

In our living room at the parsonage, we have sofa bed. It's a great sofa for lounging around watching the football game. But it is not a great sofa for sleeping on. The mattress is thin and there's a metal bar under that mattress that rather grinds you in the back. We hope to get a better one someday. And besides the discomfort of that sofa bed, also there is our cat Nermal<sup>1</sup> to be considered. In the nighttime, Nermal will curl up at your feet and sleep there, and I guess that's okay. But in the morning, say 5:30 a.m. or 6 a.m., Nermal will come up to your face, breathe his cat breathe on you, and meow for you to get up and feed him. It doesn't matter whether you are elegant, elderly theologian Dr. George Lindbeck of Yale University, or my twenty-two year old nephew Lance from Maryland. Nermal does not discriminate. He treats everyone the same. "Please get up and FEED ME!"

Love means that you are willing to dwell with others, even if you have to sleep on an old sofa bed. And we have people who have done that over the years at the parsonage. Of course, when Dr. Lindbeck comes, we insist that he sleep in one of the bedrooms, and Carol and I are happy to sleep out on the sofa bed. But we have had people over the years who love us and have been willing to put up with that thin bed.

"The Word became flesh," St. John said, "and dwelt among us." And that is more of a humility than sleeping on a sofa bed. Jesus has left heaven above to dwell here below, henceforth, forevermore. The very Word of God did this for us — the very Word, through whom everything was made, who from eternity dwelt with the Father and the Holy Spirit and was adored by the angels and the archangels, seraphim and cherubim: that holy Word was content to leave all that glory, safety, and majesty, in order to dwell with us, to be born in a stable, and to be a poor man with no place to lay his head.

More than that, he was willing, for example, to dwell at the pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem, where the invalid folk were, the blind, halt, withered, where they were waiting and hoping to be healed. (John 5) Why would he dwell there? Because that is where he was needed! To this very day, he is willing to dwell where he is needed: in our hospital room, in the wrecks and ruins of our lives, in Private Confession when the burdened soul needs his forgiveness, in our joys, in our homes, on our sofa bed wherever we need him.

And the course of his young life revealed that he was willing to dwell with humanity all the way to the rugged Cross, and then to be raised from death so that he can go on dwelling with us, dwelling in our homes, dwelling in our hearts. *That's* how much he loves us. And we are loved very much indeed!

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<sup>1</sup> Nermal: "the world's cutest kitten," from the Garfield comic strip.

What was Jesus after? What is the why and the wherefore of it all? Well, *why* he did it, why he descended from heaven to earth to dwell with us, seems to be that he loves us and was unwilling to be high and distant from us. That was my theme for last night's sermon. But there is more. There is the *end* that Jesus had in mind. What did he hope to accomplish by coming to dwell with us?

With these questions I am pointing toward a patristic theme, toward an ancient conviction of the early preachers about the meaning of Christmas. That theme goes this way: Christ descended to humanity that humanity might ascend to divinity. Think no small thoughts here. It was a mighty undertaking that Jesus set for himself in coming to earth. It is the same mighty undertaking that Jesus has in mind for you and for me, even now. He desires our transformation. He desires our sanctification. He desires that we should become new. He desires, indeed, that his image — the image of Christ — should rise up in us. Christ comes to us, not simply to keep us company, but to change us, and to change us

Let me use one of St. John's images from this morning's Gospel Lesson to try to develop this point. In this morning's reading, St. John lavishes images for Christmas. He says that Baby Jesus is the Word of God — the very Word of love at the heart of eternity. Also, St. John says that this holy Child is "life" and "light." And so we read John's great testimony:

<sup>4</sup>In him was *life*, and the life was the *light* of men..(John 1:4, RSV)

I want to linger with this teaching that Christmas has brought the light of all people into this world. Jesus is light, and through him, we are to be light too. His impact in our life is to irradiate us, if only we will let him. We are to be countercultural in this particular way: Jesus himself should shine through us, that this world might be blessed in some portion by him though *us*. He desires us to shine some in this world that is in so much need of light. And so, it is not simply that Jesus is the light of the world, he desires to be *our* light. He is willing to be the light of *all people*, if only we are willing.

Let me try a comparison. About a month ago, my wife Carol and I stood in the presence of what felt to be a miracle. You also have probably felt this kind of miracle before: I mean the miracle of music. Our friend Sharon Gunderson, who is an astonishing violinist, stood there in the midst of Saint Peter's Church and played Bach's Partita No. 2 in D minor. There she was, that slender woman, all alone, with not a note of music before her, but filled to overflowing with the music within her heart and her spirit. She says that that particular piece, Bach's Second Partita, is the most treasured music of her life. She feels that one lifetime is hardly enough to study this music, though she has spent years doing so, setting aside the standard Russian edited version of the piece in favor of a facsimile of Bach's original manuscript, setting aside modern bowing and fingering techniques in favor of Baroque techniques as she can discover them.

It was especially during the long, monumental, passionate final movement, the Ciaccona, that I formulated my notion: I am sitting here in the presence of a miracle.

But the truth is that that miracle was a *reflected* miracle. Behind the wonder of Sharon playing that piece was the much greater miracle of Bach himself. And behind Bach was the God who had made him, and to whom he dedicated his life and his music.

And so, we return to John's teaching that the holy Child of Christmas is the "light of all people." Some people in this world have so loved this Light, that they have become light themselves — to a lesser degree than Jesus, of course, but still some much needed

light in this world. We call them “the saints.” Some of them are known in Church history. Some of them are anonymous blessings, known only to their families and friends. Like Sharon Gunderson studying the daunting facsimile of Bach’s original manuscript and turning and offering that music to the world, so the saints have studied Christ and drawn near to him through the holy Word and Sacraments of the Church. And in drawing near to him, they have been transformed thereby, and brought some light to the rest of us.

This is a path open to you and me, my dear brothers and sisters. We face a new year now. And we face the remaining time God has granted us on earth. And I know about you that God has placed within your heart a desire to be good and to prove a blessing to others. Well, as you survey this world’s books and wisdom and exemplary lives, do not forget Christmas. Do not forget this One who has left the glories of heaven to sleep on our sofa bed. Let us try, with increasing intensity, to stare into the face of Jesus, the very Light of this world, and in giving ourselves over to him prove a blessing to others and a credit to him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.