

**Word of the Father,
Now in Flesh Appearing**

'O Come All You Faithful'

Hymn #159, Isaiah 9:2-7, and Luke 2:1-20

Preached as Brentwood Presbyterian Church on Dec. 24, 2009

The carol from which our text this evening comes
is really an invitation.

It invites us all to come and see
what all the amazing, seemingly unbelievable things
recorded in the Christmas stories are all about,
come and be awed and amazed
at what God has done
and what it means for us.

It is an invitation
directed to our hearts and souls,
to those places deep within us
that long for love and acceptance and guidance and support.

It is an invitation
to become fully human in relationship with Jesus Christ,
the living Word of God
who become flesh with us and for us on that first Christmas.

That's what I want to spend some time reflecting about
on this Christmas Eve of 2009 –
what does God's appearing in the flesh
really mean for us
here at Brentwood in Burnaby tonight and into 2010.

God comes as a Word
and comes in the flesh.

These two ways of talking about what happened that first Christmas
capture much of what is really important about the event.

An event that has universal meaning
(*logos* in Greek means meaning or message)
is happening here,
one that has angels singing and shepherds jumping for joy,
one that draws some of the greatest scholars of the age
to a little town in remote outpost of the Roman empire,

one that has the political and religious powers of the age
frightened enough to order a maniacal massacre.

That event is the coming into human flesh
of the Creator of all that is,
God of God and Light of Light
in the ancient church's language,
the Source and Sustaining Power of the entire universe.

This power and energy
enters into a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.
In him, we see – actually see –
what living a Godly life is all about.

For many in our contemporary society,
the Christmas event is hard to comprehend,
let alone believe in and ground their lives in.
There are all sorts of ways
of dismissing the real reason for this season
as a fanciful myth and deluded thinking.

As for those of us who gather here at Brentwood
to worship and learn,
to enjoy fellowship, and
to engage in service,
we find in the event of God taking flesh on that first Christmas
the real meaning of our lives.
We are comforted by the grace of God being with us in the flesh
and challenged to share that grace through our own lives.

It is an act of faith to believe in such a thing,
an act that goes way beyond
what we can figure out by reason alone.
It is an act of faith that brings together
the yearnings of our hearts,
the searchings of our minds, and
the hungerings of our souls
into a realization that in this event
God's love reached out to us
in a dramatically new way
to bring us back into the intimate relationships
God has desired for us since creation.

What I find intriguing in the thinking of many of those
who dismiss the possibility of faith in general
or the Christian faith in particular
is their refusal to let God be God.

They look at the miraculous, seemingly unbelievable,
elements in the Christmas story
and find there reasons to dismiss its credibility.
I, along with Christians down through the centuries,
listen to the Christmas story
and find a message of comfort and challenge
that gives human life in all its diversity common meaning and direction.

It is a story that resonates deep within my heart and soul,
a story that inspires hope,
a story that gives meaning and direction
to the contribution I can make
to the flourishing of life in this world.
It is a story of comfort and challenge.

The comfort of the Christmas story
is that God has come to be with us,
to reveal Himself to us
as a fellow human being.

This is a unique way of communicating for gods.
It's not just words, or mighty miraculous acts.
It is a living Word in Jesus Christ.
God actually takes on human flesh
and lives a human life
in Jesus Christ.

The depth of love and respect for humanity and humanity's home this shows
is remarkable.

Human life is not simply something to be endured
in order to get to a better state.
It is something to be honoured, revered, and savoured.
It is something beloved and blessed by God.
It is something to be treated like a gift from God,
not a test to be endured,
but a gift to be treasured and used with gratitude.

And therein lies the challenge.

There are some wonderful words
in the Presbyterian Church in Canada's *Book of Forms*
that capture this challenge concisely.
They are in the section outlining the responsibilities of the session
in the local congregation
and have to do with the provision of Christian education.
Christian education is offered so that people

may be confronted by the Gospel, may grow in faith, participate in the life of the Christian community, and be active witnesses to Christ in the world.

If we rise to the challenge of Christmas,
strengthened by the comfort of Christmas,
we will strive together to find ever more effective ways
of confronting people with the comfort and challenge of the Gospel,
of helping people grow in their faith,
of providing opportunities to participate in the life of the Christian community,
and of being active witnesses to Christ in the world.

The next couple of years will be crucial
in the life and witness of Brentwood.
We have the opportunity to invest in a flourishing future,
finding new people
with whom to share the comfort and challenges of the Gospel,
inviting them to come and see what God is doing in Jesus Christ
for the sake of this world.

We have the opportunity to help people see
the presence in their lives
of a wonderful counselor in times of trouble and stress,
of a mighty hopeful presence in times of despair,
of a loving parent in times of loneliness,
and of a proponent of peace in times of hatred and conflict.
That's what God promised through Isaiah.
That's what God accomplished in Jesus Christ.
That's what this church strives to offer
as the continuing Body of Christ in the world.

The first people to experience the Word of God appearing in the flesh -
shepherds from the hills around Bethlehem,
wise men from the centres of learning,
travelers being taxed and harried staff at the inn,
Mary and Joseph themselves -
had their lives changed dramatically by that event.
They saw the world differently,
they acted differently,
they contributed to their communities differently,
all because they knew in the depths of their hearts and souls
that God was fulfilling the promises of the ages
in Jesus of Nazareth.

God was inaugurating an age of comfort and challenge,
the comfort of God being with us and for us
as we rise to the challenge of being a community of wisdom, peace, and justice
in a world crying desperately for those life-giving gifts.

Beginning on January 10 here at Brentwood,
we will spend a year of Sundays at worship
and every other Friday night at our adult Bible study
exploring the comforts and challenges of the Gospel
through a study of the Psalms.
Each week we will explore what God is saying to us
as members of Christ's church
in one of those great hymns and prayers of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

We will allow ourselves be searched by those Psalms,
prodded and provoked by God's Spirit
to examine our lives in their light,
listening for how we can enjoy a deeper faith,
share a richer love,
and build a stronger community.

Martin Luther,
one of the dominant thinkers in the founding of Protestantism,
said the Book of the Psalms included
"most beautifully and briefly
everything that is in the entire Bible."
He called it a really fine handbook for the Christian life.

Throughout the search –
as we both search within ourselves and are searched by God –
we will look to the way Jesus Christ,
the Word of the Father in flesh appearing,
embodies the faith, hope, and justice
spoken of in the Psalms.

All the while,
we will find fresh and convincing ways
of inviting our friends and neighbours
to get centred in Jesus Christ in worship and learning,
enjoy community with Jesus Christ in fellowship, and
experience the compassion of Jesus Christ in service.

But that is all in the future.
This evening let us rest in the assurance
that God is with us
and brings the brilliant light of grace in Jesus Christ
to all people who walk in the darkness of our day.

Amen