

*Order of Service
December 22, 2019
Incarnation, Idolatry, Power and Powerlessness*

Musical Prelude

Greeting --Teilhard de Chardin: Incarnation; Rainer Maria Rilke

1st Hymn: Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel, Green 54

Readings -- John 1:1-5, 14; Luke 2:6-7; Isaiah 9:6; 1 Corinthians 10:14

2nd Hymn: In the Bleak Midwinter, Green 84

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- Upon our faltering humanity, you give your blessing.

3rd Hymn: Christmas Morning, Green 83

Message: Incarnation, Idolatry, Power, and Powerlessness

Silent worship

4th Hymn: What Child Is This?, Green 94

Benediction -- O Come Emmanuel

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting: Good morning Friends. Today we mark the 4th Sunday of Advent, and for us in the Northern Hemisphere, the beginning of the solar new year. From this day onward, daylight begins to grow once more.

Early in the last century, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French philosopher and Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist, wrote: ***“By virtue of Creation, and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.”*** Incarnation is God embodied, Spirit made manifest, given material existence in the flesh, in the forms and the life of this world, and it means, said Teilhard de Chardin, that the Holy is Here. That this -- this -- even in all its broken-ness, vulgarity, cruelty and unrealized possibility is Sacred, if we know how to look for God. Around the same time that Teilhard de Chardin was writing, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke penned these words:

...now raise the daringly imagined arch that holds up astounding bridges, out beyond your own life...span the abyss between opposing poles. Because inside human beings is where God learns.

As we worship today, 3 days before Christmas, and on this day of returning light, let us together practice seeing God here below, the incarnation of the Holy, born here with us with us, living as we live, learning as we learn. **And let us begin with our first hymn, a song of longing for God with us: O Come, O Come Emmanuel, Green 54.**

Readings: A story of Incarnation

Isaiah 9:6 ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For unto us a child is born.

Luke 2: 1, 2-7 *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.... ⁴Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Matthew 2:13-18 ¹³...an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod.... ¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he grew enraged, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time of the child's birth.

John 1:5, 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people....¹⁴And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and beauty.

1 corinthians 10:14 ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength...¹⁴Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.

Prayer:

Holy One, God of the ancients, God of elders, (people who need prayers, from joys and concerns) God of the young and the newly born, we gather again in faith that all is not lost. For into our broken and hurting world, O Christ, you come. Into great darkness, you are born. Upon our faltering humanity, you give your blessing. Here with us, even now, where (prayers from joys and concerns) happen, where cruelties and injustice thrive...still you come, blessing, redeeming, uplifting, calling forth the Goodness of your Creation by your very Presence...Word of God made Flesh, dwelling now and always, *then and now* -- a Light unto Darkness, the life in all people -- teach us, guide us, lead us, be with us, so we can be as you are. Teach us to be as open-armed, as needful, as defenseless as a refugee baby, a homeless child. Come now, let your Spirit be born in us, and in every improbable, humble place this Christmas, we pray. Amen.

Benediction

May loving hearts enthrone him:

Word made flesh, the life that is the light of all people.

May we know that the Holy is here, with us...

that in powerlessness, fragility, and need, God is born.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel. Incarnate Here Below. To dwell, to bless, to live with us. Amen.

Message:

In February of this year, I was given the vocation of Spiritual Life Coordinator at Longview, a senior living complex in Ithaca. I coordinate services for the various faiths, help to bring in speakers on matters of faith and spirituality, lead memorial services, and am available if and when anyone has spiritual concerns weighing upon them, or would just like to talk -- which happens not infrequently -- because this is a community of people intimately acquainted with loss. Loss of friends, loved ones, spouses, and often -- usually, inexorably as they age -- loss of their bodies' familiar capacities and abilities. And so, in my capacity as spiritual caregiver to my elders, one of the things that I find myself saying to my Longview friends regardless of their faith tradition is, "It's hard work, having a body." I've shared this observation frequently as a parent with my children as well. When there was a particularly virulent stomach bug not too long ago, for example. When knees and elbows have been scraped and shins bruised. When we have watched our own elders decline, and die. When they have known sadness settle like a weight in the chest, here, or anxiety like a clenched fist in the belly, here. Sometimes, it's hard work, having a body.

Incarnation, from the Latin, means, literally, to be made flesh, to be embodied. In the context of Christian doctrine, it is usually preceded by the definite article: *The* Incarnation, referring to the one, definitive time God was embodied in a human life, made incarnate by a human form. Orthodoxy holds that it happened just the once -- in Jesus of Nazareth. The Body that God chose to incarnate 2020 years ago was an Afro-Semitic homeless baby, a member of one of the tribes of Judea, in Palestine, a land occupied by the most potent military force the world had yet seen, the empire of Rome. This child's parents, like all subjects in occupied lands, were beholden to the emperor's decrees even when nine months pregnant. Transient, they would arrive in Bethlehem in urgent need of a place to give birth, and would settle for a stable. They would take their newborn baby and flee just after his birth to foreign lands, becoming refugees to escape the violence of the Great king Herod, who felt his mighty power somehow threatened by children like Jesus.

When this child of God, Jesus, crossed the border back to the land of his birth, after the danger had passed -- because Herod's body, like all bodies, was mortal -- Jesus would grow to be a rabbi in those still occupied territories, and his multicultural, multi-religious, multi-class movement of workers and peasants, the sick and the hungry, soldiers and sinners, poor people and prostitutes, criminals and saints so threatened the occupiers that they would have him tortured, humiliated, and horrifyingly executed --

because that is what powers and principalities do, when the bodies of ordinary people are united in Christ -- in the Word that was in the beginning with God, when they begin to wield a power that frightens the empire.

When the resounding shockwave of the trauma of Jesus' execution and the memory of his radical boundary-breaking ministry became a rallying cry, an inspiration -- (inspiration, from the Latin meaning to be guided by the Divine)--

Yes -- when death did not kill him, and the movement of the Spirit continued, resurrected, in the bodies of the poor, the displaced, the orphaned and widowed, the followers and disciples of Christ Jesus --

when God continued to move in the midst of this disparate communion of people who sought to see the Holy with them, even in all the suffering and cruelty and violence there below --

when the powerful could not destroy what had been made incarnate, what had been inspired in the powerless --

Then those men in the thrall of domination, those men tempted by the idolatry of power, would go on over the centuries to co-opt and appropriate, to absorb and neutralize the symbols, the rituals, the stories-become-scriptures that this movement developed, and to claim the name of Jesus of Nazareth as its sole, prized possession, its vanguard, bending the movement of Spirit in the bodies of this world to the will of the domination systems also of this world, to put the cross of Rome on the flags that flew before their armies.

And the name of Jesus is still being used in this way, in our time, by human beings who worship and idolize power.

Because: in human bodies, soft, fragile, mortal, embarrassingly, humbly vulgar in our unremitting needs, *it is always a temptation to worship domination.*

It is always a risk that we will fall on our knees before the God of hard power, to use the words of one of our country's current leaders.

It is understandable to want the security and the power of such a God.

But. That is not the God of the stories of the Incarnation from 2000 years ago.

Nor is it the God Who Incarnates in the flesh of the billions of mostly anonymous human bodies alive in this weary world today.

So much has been written, and sung, and preached about the way God incarnated in that Afro-Semitic baby. Creeds have been formulated, hammered out by councils ancient and modern, to circumscribe the acceptable bounds of faith, the appropriate uses of metaphor and symbol.

But we Quakers have been a non-creedal people historically, and the definite article before the word 'Incarnation' is one place where some of us have diverged, and continue to diverge, from creedal hegemony. This is a tender place, as tender as human bodies, and a fault line, a fissure along which schisms have occurred, along which, in our time, cultural divisions and power struggles simmer and flare. People in fragile bodies seek to hoard the Christ. To say **this** is where God is, and nowhere else. **This** is how God incarnates, and no other way.

But, when George Fox's dark night of the soul and mystical encounter with Jesus Christ -- "*the one,*" he would write, "*who has come to teach us himself,*" "*who can speak to our condition*" --

when Fox's experience of Christ, incarnate, began a movement of Friends whom he would famously exhort "*to answer That of God in everyone,*" he suggested that all flesh, somehow, bears the imprint of the Holy, the incarnation of The Christ, and that if Christ was born in that peasant child two millennia ago, then perhaps, perhaps, Christ also deigns to be born and present with us, through us, to move and inspire all Bodies, all mortal flesh.

Doctrines that make Jesus the only place God incarnates usually insist it must be so because Jesus was born to die for us, to save us humans from eternal damnation. *But to privilege the end of Jesus' life over the beginning is to privilege death over birth, the next life and the next world over this one. It is to suggest that the Word becomes flesh to die, rather than to dwell, to bless, and to live.*

And it ensures we *miss* a reading of those stories-become-scriptures that **specifically** challenges domination systems, and the ways of **power idolatry**. Because in those stories, written by the people who were trying to keep the movement of Christ alive, the human flesh that becomes the dwelling place of God

-- the God who incarnates in human flesh -- is **powerless, fragile, and defined by absolute neediness**. The Sacred blesses neediness with God's very presence, from the inside of that need. Where needs are, where fragility is, where powerlessness lies, **that is where God is**. God's power dwells, and lives, in powerlessness. **The life that is the life in all people, comes with, through, and in, absolute fragility, and abject need.**

To our spiritual ancestors and to us, these whispered tales told by flickering firelight were then, and are now, almost sacrilegious, almost blasphemous, a debasement of any lofty notions of an other-than-human, other-wordly God, and almost an exaltation of human-ness.

2020 years later we still have a very hard time understanding a holiness that lowly or a humanity that holy.

We still question the reality of the power born in powerlessness.

But it is a power that is still being midwifed today. In the bodies of ordinary, anonymous people...in Hong Kong, in Beirut, in Puerto Rico, in Ukraine, in the United States of America.

In all the places where a power moves that is different from the power idolized by kings and would-be kings who call themselves Great.

Every year at Christmas we are invited once again to consider the possibility that in God's *incarnation*, -- in the synthesis of matter and spirit, in the daringly imagined bridge between sacred and profane, -- *holiness is here on earth*. And perhaps the birth, and life, and ministry, and death, and *life beyond death* of Jesus show us **how** to imagine and *to be that bridge* ourselves. *how it is Holy to be human, and Sacred to be powerless.*

Because it is in Powerlessness that the Sacred is born, in fragile humanness that the holy comes to be.

And maybe these stories mean that it's holy to be afraid, to not know what comes next, to be a refugee, to be a child in danger, to *need*: need reassurance, food, breastmilk, someone to change your swaddling cloths.

Perhaps fear and fragility are where courage and hope, faith and possibility are *born*. Where else would they be called forth? Where else would God learn?

Perhaps God knows our condition from the inside and understands *just how hard it is, having a body*, and *blesses* the way Bodies never cease having needs from the day they are born until the day they die.

And so, needs are where God is given new life. Needs call forth the innate capacity of other incarnate human beings to meet them, to give care, to respond with love, and to answer That of God in Everyone. *The God of the Child given unto us gives only by receiving.*

And *that* is how the Word is made flesh, how the Body of Christ is born, how God is *here*, learning along with us: how to be embodied, how to be incarnate.

“For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6For unto us a child is born.”

“Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.”