

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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December 25, 2022

Well, I hope that you weren't looking for the familiar Christmas Eve story this morning. Today's gospel is not the Lukan version with Jesus, the angels, and the shepherds. Rather, today is John's gospel. Unlike Luke and Matthew, John does not write of Jesus's conception or birth. John doesn't care about Joseph or Mary as a part of Jesus's human origins. Instead, Jesus' beginnings are described in cosmological terms with an emphasis on Jesus as God's son.

You see, John's story places Jesus at the beginning of all that is. In that first verse, you may have noticed that John started with "In the beginning..." which echoes the start of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. John continues, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." What we find is that John is not talking about the Bible as the Word. Rather, John uses the phrase "the Word" as a substitute for Jesus. That phrase also echoes back to Psalm 33 where it stands for God's power of creation and redemption. John goes on to pick up on more imagery from Genesis as he names light and life – both aspects of the creation narrative. You see, John is arguing that Jesus did not just come from Mary and Joseph, but rather, Jesus has been from the beginning.

Earlier this week, with all that in mind, I felt like this gospel was going to disappoint some of you. I also was having trouble figuring out the best way to write a disappointing sermon, so I turned to something I recently discovered. It's called ChatGPT, and it's an artificial intelligence platform that can interact with you in a conversational way. So, I entered in, "write a sermon for Christmas Day on John 1:1-18 for an ELCA Lutheran church." And... it started to type...

It said, “Dear friends, On this special day of Christmas we are reminded of the incredible love and grace that God has for us. As we read in the opening verses of John’s gospel...” and it goes on to talk about the incarnation, Jesus as one of us, Jesus as taking on our struggles and pain, that the message is for and includes all people, and that we are called to love and serve others, especially the marginalized and the oppressed. I was dumbfounded. At that point, I wondered if I should change professions, and how I would explain to Vicar that her vocation is going to be outsourced to a much cheaper AI? Now, I didn’t use the AI’s sermon. Honestly, it was an okay sermon, but not great. However, I began to wonder what would make it better.

Then, I went back and re-read John’s gospel verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” So, yes, that AI can be type up, format, and put together something generic, but there’s still something missing. The dwelling, the enfleshment, and the relationality of these words are what truly brings them to life. You see, in John’s gospel that is a fundamental idea. While the Word has been and while God’s presence is eternal, it is because of God’s enfleshment that we have all received grace upon grace—that’s verse 16. And that would be great news if we had lived 2,000 years ago. Because then we could see God in human form. But, the real kicker to the Christmas story comes *after* Jesus’ resurrection. There the disciples were gathered around and Jesus greeted them and sent them the Holy Spirit. In that moment, God’s creative and redeeming nature became not just in the Word or in one flesh, but had been given to all of the disciples and all of us.

You see, the power of Christmas is not only that Jesus came among us but it's the reminder that God is still here, among us, enfleshed in you and me, seen in the loving acts of sharing our wealth and advocating for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.

So, friends, on this Christmas morning, we remember the enfleshment of our God in human form. We recall the Word that has been, the Word that is, and the Word that will be. We remember that we have a relational God who stops at nothing to show us love, life, and grace upon grace. So, throughout these 12 days of Christmas, may we seek to see the gift of this relationality, may we search for the glimpses of God enfleshed, and may we strive to reflect God's love to all whom we encounter. Merry Christmas, dear friends! Amen.