

Sermon January 2 2022 Rick Floyd

SCRIPTURE:

Revelation 21:1-6:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 1:1-18:

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.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

SERMON: “Our Down to Earth God” The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

Happy New Year! It’s still Christmas! Being Christmas, my sermon today is called “Our Down to Earth God.” I want to talk about the mystery of the incarnation, how God came among us in Jesus, and what that means for our life and our faith. First, let me tell you what I mean by the mystery of the incarnation.

Saint John's Gospel begins with these wonderful words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Now if it occurred to you that that sounds an awful lot like Genesis 1, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth," you'd be on to something. John quite intentionally echoes Genesis 1's "In the beginning." It's his way of signaling to us that the coming of Jesus Christ is a new creation much like the first, and that it was part of God's plan all along, from the beginning.

Keep in mind that the Word of God in the Bible is not just God's speech, but God's intention and activity. Isaiah 55:11 says that God's Word does not return to him empty. For example, recall that in Genesis 1 when light was created, God didn't *make* light. What did God do? He spoke light. He said, "Let there be light!" And there was light! So when God speaks, things happen. God's Word is activity.

"In the beginning was the Word." Unlike the other three Gospels, John doesn't start his story with an event in time. (The Rev. Barbara Kershner just did a nice thought experiment about *time*.) In the other Gospels, something happens in time, a temporal event. Jesus is born, Jesus begins his ministry. Here in John, this does not happen in time. Instead, John is referring to the God who is beyond time, the creator of the heavens and the earth. This God lives not in time, but in eternity. This God is not finite, but infinite. This God is literally "out of this world."

But then, in verse 14, John pivots and makes an extraordinary claim about this God. He says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Our New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation says "the Word became flesh and *lived* among us," and the Revised Standard Version (RSV) says "*dwelled* among us." But both translate the Greek word which means, literally, "*tabernacled*" among us. And if you're old enough – I've been preaching for so long that I used to say "Those of you old enough to remember The King James Version (and I'd see all these heads nodding) – now that I'm kind of getting up there myself, there are fewer and fewer of you – but those of you who do remember the King James will remember that this reading in John says, "And the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us."

"Tabernacle" means dwelling place, residence. And you will recall that the ancient tabernacle was Israel's "tent of meeting" where the Ark of the Covenant was stored, traveled around, and where God was believed to be present, in the days before the Temple was built.

So, we might say the eternal God chose to "pitch his tent" with us in the person of Jesus. This is the mystery of the incarnation, the divine taking on flesh, which is what incarnation means. This is the "down to earth God" of my sermon title.

And what does God's Word incarnate in Jesus bring to us as he comes into our world? "Light and life to all he brings," as our hymn says. If you want a wonderful summation of the incarnation, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is really good theology. We're going to sing it a

little later in the service. Light and life to all he brings. Light against the darkness, and life against death and non-being.

Verse 5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Which I think is a good verse to cling to in these days as we enter a new year, and struggle to stay hopeful in the face of another year of pandemic and grave political turmoil and division in our nation. The light will overcome the darkness. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it, nor will it.

What else does this embodied God bring to us by his incarnation? Verse 16 says, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” “Fullness” here translates another lovely Greek word, *pleroma*. Isn’t that a great word? Fullness. What does it mean? The totality of the Godhead which dwells in Jesus. Jesus Christ’s fullness is an inexhaustible source of grace, “grace upon grace,” as John says. Grace, you will recall, is an unmerited gift given freely without conditions. How’s that for a Christmas present? So, as we can see, our “down to earth God” brings a lot to the table.

Having said that, what does the Incarnation mean for our life and for our faith? First of all, it reminds us that our lives are embodied lives. We have bodies, or more correctly, we *are* bodies. We are not spirits, but finite embodied creatures. I was starkly reminded of this when I broke my wrist in July, and had to have a couple surgeries, and lots of pain. There were times I wished I wasn’t quite so existentially embodied, but our physical being is inescapable. We are embodied persons.

We are born with a body. We grow, we get bumps along the way, we may be injured or sick, eventually we will all die. Our life is an embodied life, and the Incarnation assures us that, because Jesus also had such a life, God knows what it is like to live such a life.

God not only knows, but loves us as embodied persons. It’s really important to remember that our religion mustn’t become excessively “otherworldly.” It is this world that God made and loves, and this world into which God came in Jesus Christ. Frederick Buechner once wrote: “One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be **more spiritual than God**.” And Madeleine L’Engle argues that God coming into our world sacralizes [makes sacred] the whole of creation. She writes, “There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation.”

Another important implication of the Incarnation is the dignity of all human beings. Since God in Christ shared our human life, all humans are worthy of the same dignity, regardless of differences in race, class, nationality or creed. God didn’t come among us for just “our kind,” or people who look like us, but for all humankind. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died last week, once said, “God’s dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.”

Another implication of the Incarnation is that “God is with us.” Remember what they called Jesus? “Immanuel,” God with us. What does it mean to say that God is with us? There’s a wonderful word in the Old Testament, *hesed*. (I fall in love with these wonderful Greek and

Hebrew words. I apologize, if you may not be quite as excited about them as I am.) But this word is *hesed*, which is usually translated in the RSV and NRSV Bibles as “steadfast love,” God’s steadfast love. At the beginning of the pandemic, we read a little book by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann about the pandemic, called “Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety.” Isn’t that a great title? And he talked about *hesed* as “God’s tenacious solidarity with humankind.” That’s what God-with-us means. Here is a love that will not let us go.

This is the good news that runs through all of Scripture and culminates in Jesus Christ, “God with us.” God is with us through the shocks and strains of daily life, through COVID and political upheaval, in sickness and in health, in life and in death.

And the final implication of the Incarnation that I want to talk about is that we not only have an embodied life, we have an embodied faith. Our faith is not just individual, not just private. We have an embodied faith. It means we live out our faith together. That’s why we’re here in worship together.

Think of some of the things that we have been deprived of by COVID: the handshakes and hugs of the Passing of the Peace and the physical interaction of our sacraments. Yes, we have adapted admirably, but remote church loses something important about who we are. Our God is a “down to earth God,” a God with us, and not a remote God. This God calls us to community, to be embodied together in congregations to do the work of advancing human flourishing.

Which we have continued to do. Our Afghan family is here. Some of you are working to welcome them and help them. But God calls us together, to be together, to work together. Keep in mind that the principal image of the church in the New Testament is “the body of Christ.” We gather as a body in congregations; we are members of the one body.

It has been hard to be church during COVID. As some of you know, my daughter Rebecca is a United Church of Christ (UCC) pastor in Rhode Island. I have watched her struggle to bring personal pastoral care to her congregation, to find creative ways to work around the limitations of living in a pandemic.

Congregations have been deprived of the kind of in-person life that is typical of Christians in community. In some respects we have been living in a kind of exile, living in hope for a return to our typical way of being together, of sharing our lives, eating together, living, laughing, embracing one another, and just being together.

In addition, our current fractious divisions around vaccination and politics have made it difficult for churches, for congregations, to be united around a common purpose and mission. There was a distressing article in the *Washington Post* last week about the number of clergy who are leaving the ministry, because it’s just so hard to keep their congregation together, to do the work during the pandemic. What does it mean to be church for everybody when people can’t agree on basic facts like science, the truth of the news, or the outcome of a fair election?

What will the future bring in 2022? I anticipate that there will be no “return to normal,” but rather, we will have to find our “new normal.” “Our new normal” is a concept I learned two decades ago as I was recovering from a severe Traumatic Brain Injury. One of the most helpful pieces of advice my neuro-psychologist gave me was, “Don’t compare who you are now with who you were before.”

Together as church, you and I will have to discover our new normal, what it means to be the First Congregational Church in Stockbridge, in a new way. We don’t yet know what that will look like. Our much-loved pastor now returns from sabbatical, hopefully refreshed and renewed. We have learned how to be church in new ways during a difficult time. Our lay leadership has discovered new gifts and new depth to old gifts. You know who I’m talking to right here!

I had three sabbaticals from my last church, and each time I returned I was impressed by how the lay leadership had grown into and owned their gifts for leadership. My congregation was stronger for having to live without my leadership alone. Others stepped up and did what had to be done. And you have done that, too. I hope you are proud of yourselves for what you have done these last months.

I thought the Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School experiment (having several preachers from that school here during our pastor’s sabbatical) was a great success. I was very proud. I’m an Andover Newton graduate, and my daughter is a Yale graduate. Can you believe I never stepped foot in Yale, and they’re already asking me for money because Andover Newton is now at Yale? Anyway, the people that came up here from Andover Newton at Yale did a terrific job. It was a great idea. Thanks to our pastor Brent Damrow and to church member John Canning for coming up with it.

So, now as we enter a new year and move into a new future, let us remember, above all, that it is God’s future. The God who is for us and not against us. The God who chose to pitch his tent with us, to share our life.

I want to close with another text that you heard today, from Revelation. If St. John’s religious imagination conjures up “In the beginning,” another John, the author of the Book of Revelation, imagines in a vision the end of time, the completion of the Christian story, in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, where the risen Christ sits on a throne. God is still dwelling with his people. And, in fact, the Greek word is once again “tabernacling.”

Our two readings today bookend the Christian Story, from in the beginning to the end, from Alpha to Omega.

I admit that I have a warm spot in my heart for St. John the Divine, as I was baptized in the Cathedral in New York City that bears his name. Listen with me to his vision of God with us:

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also, he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Amen.

We are honored to have as our guest preacher today The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd. Rick is Pastor Emeritus of the First Church of Christ in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he served for 22 years. Before that he served congregations in Maine and was a seminary chaplain. He is now a member of the congregation of the First Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.