

Giving The Word Flesh

Incarnational Preaching for the Season of the Incarnation

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Christmas is a time for telling and hearing stories. Dickens' *Christmas Carol* is one among many stories of the season that we love to hear. It sets the mood, creates a feeling, reminds us of other memories of Christmas. Around the Christmas dinner table stories are told of Christmases past, of family members no longer present, of childhood excitement. It is a time rich with stories.

The church has a Christmas story, *the* Christmas story. If the church did not have that story remembered in its familiar detail, it would be difficult to imagine what our celebration of the origins of Jesus might be. Mark's gospel, for whatever reason, omits a story of Jesus' birth. John tells the story in mystical/philosophical terms. But Matthew and Luke supply the colorings and hues that form the most familiar nativity accounts.

The account of Jesus' birth comes to us in narrative form. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. . . ." "Behold wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. . . ." "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth. . . ." Because the stories are so familiar, we tend to miss their narrative characteristics so descriptive of the "who," "what," and "how" of the nativity of Jesus, a nativity fraught with earthiness, political intrigue, and imposition. These nativity accounts are, in fact, narratives within narratives, stories melded into the gospels which are themselves edited accounts of the life, public ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

If you or I wanted to start a new world religion like Christianity, we might want to establish our messianic leader as a mystical, supernatural god/man with heavenly powers and origins. Most likely a human birth would not be suitable. If we were to take our cue from current sci-fi writing, an other-worldly origin might call for a visit from heavenly visitors who would leave a cocoon, a pod, or some other non-human source for the messiah. Early Middle Eastern mythology with its images of warring factions of light and darkness and other-worldly conflict make it possible to imagine that Jesus' origins might have been described by first century writers in another form than that which we have, elaborating his earthly parentage with quite unusual other-worldly modification.

The gospel writers, on the other hand, while they relate the story of Jesus' birth with signs of heavenly approval such as the angel chorus, and the adoration of the Magi, nevertheless recount the nativity stories in such a way as to emphasize the thoroughly human way in which Jesus enters the human condi-

tion. He is borne by a woman, given birth in a specific historical setting, born in the midst of squalor, the child of the most modest of parents. The nativity stories, in their narrative specificity and emphatic humanity, suggest a form for preaching in this and any season which relies strongly on the movement of incarnation and format of story. By incarnation, I mean here that process of moving from the abstract and unformed, to the concrete, specific, and physical.

How do you tell the Christmas story in such a way that its message of God's love will be heard afresh? One answer lies in preaching incarnationally and narratively; that is, preaching the story of Jesus' birth and its meaning using the elements of story. But what is "incarnational" and "narrative" preaching and how is it different from any other preaching? Several notable contributions have been made in recent homiletical literature describing the place, purpose and style of story elements in preaching including those treatments by Fred Craddock;¹ Morris Niedenthal, Charles Rice and Edmund Steimle;² Don Wardlaw, et. al.;³ and most recently, Ralph L. and Gregg Lewis.⁴ Each describes story elements in preaching by using differing terms to characterize what about preaching is story-like. Among the many facets of story elements in sermons discussed by these authors, three are important for this discussion. The first is an inductive rather than deductive mode of expression, so that the hearer is asked to participate in the story by moving it in his/her thinking from the particular to the abstract and then reinterpreting the story in personal terms. The second element is the suggested use of story elements in preaching such as plot, narrative, point of view, tension, denouement, and character development. Thomas Long has likened this internal movement of the sermon to the development of a story plot:

Sermons cannot always be stories; they sometimes do not even include stories, but they must always have plots, patterns of dynamic, sequential elements. In this sense, the sermon is storylike, even when it includes no stories per se.⁵

The third element is an emphasis on human experience, using the everyday occurrences and familiar objects of daily life to illustrate and reflect religious truth. All of this is not to suggest that preaching is the art of writing a weekly short story. Without the presence of some story elements, however, the sermon may lack the elements of congregational involvement and listener identification that are essential for maintaining interest.

The question may arise, "Is this Biblical preaching?" The answer is emphatically, "Yes." Nothing could be more scriptural, especially since it conforms to the form and style of the gospels themselves as well as Jesus' style of teaching and preaching! It is, moreover, a characteristically Christian form of conveying religious truth and insight. Jesus, as he taught publicly used a method of teaching that was clearly inductive in its method, citing the particular example as illustrative of the general truth. The parables are the primary examples of this form. In the same way that Jesus used his stories for evangelistic, eschatological, and ethical teaching, so may we.

In the incarnation, God takes human form as spirit becomes flesh in Jesus. In him, heaven intersects with earth and the earth is redeemed. In incarna-

tional preaching the challenge to the preacher is to point to those places where heaven is evident in the earthly and where the spiritual is evident in the physical. This method takes seriously the dawning of the kingdom of God announced by Jesus, and looks forward to evidences of the continuing arrival of that kingdom on earth. In order to do that, however, the preacher must be alert like a shepherd to hear the angel choruses when they are audible and to be ready to follow like a magi to those places where evidence of Emmanuel can be found. This will most likely be in the least likely places, yet most frequently in the earthly and physical and familiar.

How, then, do we announce the incarnation incarnationally, using an inductive method, narrative elements, and drawing from concrete human experience? Here is one approach offered not for its homiletical excellence, but as a beginning place for analysis. Let's use as a text Luke 2:1-20 and the homiletical context a late night Christmas Eve communion.

While Shepherds Watch

He dozed late in the hours of the night, leaning on his rifle. The cool night air had an anaesthetic effect on him. The loneliness of keeping watch for trouble, there on the Lebanese border, had proven to be a problem before, but on this night with so many Christian tourists in Jerusalem for the holiday and with Chanukah just past, he wished he could be at home with his family rather than having pulled reserve duty in December. He understands the danger with enemies all around, a danger known by every Israeli. So he takes his turn each year like everyone else. Still he longs for a day of peace when war shall be no more and ancient hatreds may be put to rest. As he nods in drowsiness, he will be unaware of the opening in the clouds and the barely audible sounds of heavenly voices which will bear the news of the day he awaits singing softly in his dreams of peace.

In a nursing home bed on corridor C, Laura Davison lies restless in the night. Because of her advanced Alzheimer's disease, she has passed this night as if it were any other in July or March. Time has lost its connection to events for her. She has noticed the bright colored lights on the plastic tree in the hall, and vague memories of something happier, perhaps children's voices, crossed her mind and then became lost in a morass of confusion. As she lies in her bed this night with her comforter lying over her, she will be unaware of the presence in her room of a Comforter whose protective arms will surround her and sustain her all night long. When the night nurse looks in at 2:00 a.m., Laura will be sound asleep.

At 1900 Maple Drive, Jane Bronson is busily wrapping the last of her Christmas presents. She has put her infant into bed and rushed around the house hoping to get everything in order before Ted arrives home. A heck of a thing! Their first Christmas together as a married couple and Ted had to take the late evening run on the commuter train. Being a

conductor with no seniority has its drawbacks. But they were both grateful for him to find work, what with the trouble he had had finding a job at all. When Ted finally arrives home, there will be a small celebration toasting the occasion, a turkey sandwich before bed, and then a look at cribside at the most beautiful baby in their lives, who will, for all the life of him look like a gift from heaven lying in his swaddling clothes, and they, for the life of them, like worshipping royalty. As Ted's arm slips around Jane's waist, they both will sense the closeness of God's love in their closeness this night.

How does God come to us when he comes incarnate in Christmas? He comes in forms unexpected, yet in ways so familiar that we barely notice, almost as if we were like shepherds so drowsy from the cool night air that they nearly miss the opening in the clouds and the angel choruses that beckon them to follow a star until it leads them from heaven once again to earth. Can it be that in all of our Christmas expectations, our ways of "making it Christmas" with all the right cookies, and all the right visits from children and relatives, with all the right re-enactments of Christmases past, that we may be in danger of missing the true news of joy and of hope born at Christmas. For in this season we celebrate not just the exchanging of presents or the merry spirit abroad or the gaiety of the countryside festooned with color, but the birth of a child and the visitation of a messiah who through his life, death, and resurrection blesses this life of ours with all of its humanity and pathos, its laughter and tears, its tragedy and triumph. In this world where Christmas comes, there is no end to the wonder that enters and transforms our lives. Because of Jesus, wine and bread become evidence and remembrance of his presence among us. And life itself becomes almost sacramental, the place where God transforms the familiar into the holy.

And when that happens, for shepherds who least expect it, the angels sing and the heavens blaze. Especially when we least expect it.

In the sermon sketch above, there are several elements of incarnational preaching. The introductory profiles of people on Christmas Eve draw a picture of the many conditions of humanity addressed by Christmas. Others could include the family which has come to worship at church, the teenager who has considered suicide, the harried businesswoman who has attempted too much in preceding days and only now has the chance to think of the true meaning of Christmas. The possibilities are as varied as the humanity represented in our churches, towns, and in our world. Each brief profile allows the congregation to broaden its vision of who is included in the love and compassion of God in the incarnation. It also invites identification with some of the human needs which are represented. Here also is the character development, tension, and plot described earlier as necessary to incarnational preaching. As each individual and situation is presented, questions arise such as, "What do these people have in common?" "How can their need be addressed by God?" "What does Christmas have to say to this problem?" The listener becomes involved in the sermon because its predicaments and issues are easily identifiable and not easily remedied, like most human problems. Tension builds in the sermon until a denoue-

ment is achieved in the conclusion as the physical, everyday world is identified as the place where God enters and transforms life. In that sense, not only the text behind the sermon, but also the form of the sermon itself are incarnational, taking the abstract and giving it specific, concrete identification.

Specificity of situation and characterization also assists in maintaining listener involvement. In a world where we seldom see or know real shepherds, it is helpful to see who some modern "shepherds" are, everyday people going about the usual, yet people for whom God is preparing a new vision of hope and blessing. They are a soldier keeping watch and longing for peace, an elderly woman reliant on the kindness and care of others, a young married woman whose hopefulness in motherhood adds a touch of humanity to marriage and parenting. The specificity carries over into the interpretive section of the sermon as the material and physical things of life are identified as God's locus of visitation, as in the bread and wine of communion.

Finally, the sermon relies on the involvement of the congregation to make specific applications from these particularized representatives. This is an inductive process which involves taking the specific, concrete examples presented, abstracting them, interpreting them, and then reapplying them in specific personal terms.

The form for the sermon above is only one among many ways to approach incarnational preaching. The characterizations of persons used here may suggest that such preaching must have lengthy descriptive story elements such as individual character development. But that is not the case at all. Actually, the important issue is that the sermon express a progressive movement of ideas, have specificity of person and place, and draw from common experiences so as to allow the person in the pew to see in your words that it is he or she you are talking about. To do so is to do no less than the gospel writers did in telling the story they bore of a savior of flesh and blood, born in that particular time when "a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. . . ."

So, in this season of advent and incarnation, where are the signs of Christ's coming and arrival that you see? There's the place for pointing to hope. Give the word flesh and it will dwell among us.

NOTES

¹Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Enid, Oklahoma: Phillips University, 1974).

²Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

³Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Preaching Biblically* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

⁴Ralph L. and Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway, 1983).

⁵Thomas G. Long, "Plotting the Text's Claim Upon Us," in *Preaching Biblically*, ed. Don M. Wardlaw (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).