

Protagonist Corner

The Word Became Flesh: An Advent Worship Story in Four Voices

Mark Davis, Fani Lemken, Joie Hand
Heartland Presbyterian Church, Clive, Iowa

The Worship Committee

In the beginning was the idea. The idea became conversation and the conversation became yarn in willing hands. The yarn became scarves and the scarves became the offering. In the offering the story lived in the flesh.
D. Mark Davis, Advent sermon

Worship during the season of Advent is an opportunity to participate in the hopes and fears of all the years that are met in the simple birth of a child. At Heartland Presbyterian Church, Advent worship is a creative process of combining word and image into a new theme for each Advent season. It changes from year to year; one Advent season we organized our seating in the round, with cascading blue fabric on the ceiling pouring into the font at the center, inviting reflection on what Advent means for those who have been claimed in baptism as we “Wait in the Water.” Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, we put the sanctuary in disarray – filled with the kind of debris we saw in a photo of a flooded Presbyterian Church in New Orleans – and spent the season longing for “God in the Destruction.” With each new theme, we are standing with the people of God who maintain hope, even in the most forlorn times.

The Worship Committee at Heartland is fairly hands-on in the creative process for conceiving of worship themes for major worship seasons such as Lent and Advent. The Pastor and the Parish Associate for Worship Planning sit on the committee, along with a mix of artistic and pragmatic church members. Together, we listen for where the Spirit is calling us to focus each season. Committee members take inspiration from a wide range of sources. In 2011, the Advent theme was suggested by a woman in our congregation who had a dream. She is the person on our Mission Committee who organizes quarterly meals at a homeless shelter, one of which is always on December 22. Her dream was to knit enough scarves for each of the 140 persons in the shelter. A few months later, when the Worship Committee met to plan Advent worship, the committee decided to make this scarf project the organizing theme for the season of Advent.

The Knitters

After we served our meal at the shelter last April, a light bulb came on: I imagined how amazing it would be to give each person at Central Iowa Shelter a scarf as a Christmas gift. I envisioned the tables at the shelter, adorned with neat piles of rolled scarves, ready for each guest to choose his or her favorite, maybe because of the special stitch, or type of yarn used.

Jacque Crouch, originator of the scarf project

They knitted scarves for months. Some were experienced knitters and created scarves with complex stitches and beautiful fringe. Others picked up needles for the

first time and labored over every loop. Some purchased the finest yarn in boutique shops. Others spent carefully saved coins for a pretty shade of pink. And they sat knitting, at home, on bleachers watching children during sports practice, in the morning over steaming cups of coffee.

Word spread. Two of the yarn boutiques in town donated boxes of yarn to the cause – not remainders or left-overs. The experienced knitters recognized the expensive yarn in the donation box. A food business didn't want to be left out; they donated goodie bags to go along with the scarves.

The original goal was 140 scarves, to reach most of the guests the shelter serves on a typical December evening. By the time the van was loaded to make the delivery, close to 300 scarves were rolled and packed inside. There were enough for the shelter, for Cross Ministries, for Hansen House, and 75 more for people living under bridges.

A dedication service was held at the beginning of Advent, and the scarves were displayed on wire figures, on windowsills, and on chair backs. The knitters were in awe and humility when they saw the display. "I didn't feel worthy," was a common response from the knitters, whose steady knitting had surpassed every expectation for the project.

The Worshipper

We filled up the van and hauled all of the scarves to Heartland Presbyterian for the Advent display. There were mannequins crafted of wire, wood, card board and Styrofoam waiting to be adorned. A blue plastic homeless camp in the center of the sanctuary finished the total effect. This exhibit transformed Advent into a real world....

Jacque Crouch

Advent. The Year of Our Lord, Two Thousand and Eleven. The sanctuary had been transformed into a living diorama, full of "Beholds!" for anyone with eyes to see. The first visual response was confusion. What was that pile of junk doing in the chancel below the cross? Why were there wire forms scattered throughout the front of the sanctuary? Where was the Christmas tree or a wreath or the banners?

On closer inspection the junk consisted of plywood, plastic, and tin rudely crafted together. A shelter of some kind? Surely not the stable for this year's pageant! Aha! A homeless shelter. A homeless shelter instead of a crèche? A homeless shelter with the *feel* of a crèche, front and center in the sanctuary, a sanctuary within a sanctuary? It was eye-grabbing. There was no denying it or the message.

What about the wire forms that looked like aliens? With a little work and some imagination, they resolved themselves into mannequins reminiscent of dressmaker forms, but with attitude. Spare to begin with and anonymous, they slowly adopted scarf personalities over the course of the season, scarves of many colors, handmade scarves, beautiful, warm- in- every- way scarves. So many scarves arrived that when all of the forms had been adorned, scarves started stacking up against the windows, along the chancel rail, across the communion table. Where did those scarves come from? What did they mean? How did they get there? Where were they going?

They came from the loving hands of church members, of students, of friends, of aunts, of cousins, and of strangers. They meant that service and compassion *can* be expressed physically and visually in witness to God's call. They blessed the sanctu-

ary for an Advent season, sending the news out that in serving each other, we serve Christ. They were given to the strangers, the brothers and the sisters, who gathered at the Central Shelter on Christmas Eve to share a hot meal and accept the scarves of many colors--*our* strangers, *our* brothers, and *our* sisters who taught us or reminded us of what and who we wait for on Christmas Day.

The Preacher

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

John's prologue is not often used as an Advent text. It lacks the stirring anticipation of Isaiah's poetry and the warm familiarity of Luke's and Matthew's narratives. We selected John's prologue as our centering text for the Advent season because retelling the creation story offers a reflection on the process of creativity itself. Consider John's twin propositions, "the Word was with God" and "the Word was God." How can the Word be both the same as ("was") and distinct from ("was with") God at the same time? The Christian tradition has dealt with this problem metaphysically and controversially for many years through Christological and Trinitarian formulas. Our experience of conceiving and creating scarves offered a fresh way of embracing the identity and difference between the Word and God.

When our knitters embarked on creating a scarf, the more seasoned ones would imagine the scarf first. There was initially a "creative idea" or a "logos" of the scarf. The idea was one with the knitter – reflecting tastes, past experiences, and passions. Yet, the idea was different from the knitter ; it had a specific purpose that would become an entity all its own. The idea was and was not the knitter. In time, the idea became a knitted scarf, which gave us fresh appreciation for John's stirring words, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory."

So, where will the next Advent take us? Some folks will knit again, creating caps and gloves for our friends at the shelter. Some will find other ways to serve, as we live toward God's presence. The Worship Committee will continue to keep ears to the ground and eyes wide open in order to see where the Spirit takes us in celebration, proclamation, and service.