



God be in our heads and in our understanding, God be in our eyes and in our looking, God be in our mouth and in our speaking, God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

A Merry Christmas! I am so thrilled to be with all of you. For the last four months I've been living in Austin, Texas as I'm on this journey of priesthood. And so to be with you is just a thrill. And I've missed you. I've missed being here every week, and so I'm grateful that I have the privilege to share just some thoughts on this first weekend post Christmas.

I'd like you to take a minute and just look at the cover of our program, if you could. It's a wonderful image created by a master artist, Donald Jackson, who was the art director and illustrator for the Saint John's Bible project in the early 2000s. And there's so much that I could point out in this beautiful image, and I would encourage you to take a picture of it or take it home because this is a kind of image where you can use it as what we call *visio divina*, where you look at it and you pray through a scripture and you have that kind of speak to you because there's just so many beautiful images.

But for our purposes today, I'm just encouraging you to take note of the title of the piece because it is the theme of our time together. "The Word became flesh and lived among us. The Word became flesh and lived among us." I'm not sure that there is a better phrase in all of scripture to describe Christmas, that God would come close into human existence, that God would take on our flesh to be close to His creation.

Now, I've always been enamored by that little phrase, and I really like different versions and translations of it. One of my favorite comes from a Presbyterian minister, theologian, author. His name is Eugene Peterson, and his translation of the text is this: the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. I love that, that the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. Why? Because we all live in neighborhoods. We've moved into neighborhoods and been the new people in the neighborhood. We've been old people in the neighborhood. We understand that neighborhoods are communities, they're close, and God decided to come close, to move into our human neighborhood, to enter into our existence, to leave His environment of a heavenly home and neighborhood and move into an earthly one.

Very early Christmas morning, I woke up and did the first thing that all of us do, I looked at my phone. No, I'm just kidding. You should not be looking at your phones! But I did look at my phone because a message stood out to me and it was from my friend Esther, who lives in Italy, and she and I were in a cohort together at Fuller Seminary years ago when I was getting my first degree in theology. And she sent this beautiful, concise saying from Irenaeus of Lyon, who is an early church father. This is what it said: "The incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord. He who, because of His immense love, became what we are to make us what He is." That God would become what we are – human, so that we could be made into what God is.

It's a profound thought. Now, I don't believe that this early church father was saying that we are to be made into Gods, but I do believe that what he was saying is we should be carrying and being made in the essence of Jesus, made in the very image that we are made in. But what is that essence and what does it mean for us today? My hope in this little time that we have together is that when we leave here, we know more of what we are to be and the deep implications of Christmas, or better yet, the deep implications of God becoming who we are and moving into our neighborhood.

As I started to ponder this idea of Christ entering into our existence, in our experience, I started thinking about times in my life where someone had entered my own life, especially at a time of need. Have you had those moments? Have you had those moments where you're in doubt or you're in need and you're really hoping that you need a word of encouragement or something and someone enters in? Have you had those moments? You can shake your head. It's okay. I think all of us have, there's so many moments where we need something and all of a sudden something or someone in particular enters in and changes our circumstances.

For some reason, I kept thinking of one story and I didn't know why, and it became more clear as I started writing out the message. And so I'll tell you this story. I was a part of leading a trip to Nepal years ago with a group of men, and we were charged to work alongside this great leader, Ramesh, who has a ministry that fights against the darkness of human trafficking. And he and his work are just a great light in a very, very dark reality of our world. It's intense, it's dangerous, and it's difficult work.

And so, part of this trip was to trek up into the mountains for three days and visit and see these young women and their families in these villages, learn about the deceptive ways of human trafficking that's happening in that very vulnerable part of the world, and then be part of training. One of the reasons we're part of training, and I don't know if you know this, but Detroit is one of the hubs of

human trafficking in the United States, and we actually learned skills there that we brought back here.

And so the trekking was going to be difficult, and many of us trained for months in preparation, and we were told to pack as lightly as possible. And we were saying, your backpack shouldn't be anything more than maybe 20 pounds, but if you can get it down to 12 to 15 pounds, that's optimum. And one of the older gentlemen was an ex-military guy. He didn't take that advice and he showed up with a pack that was just under 50 pounds. And he thought he was going to be all right. But the trail on the very first morning, it started out like this, maybe for the first two minutes, and then it went like this, and then five minutes in or 10 minutes in, I'm not kidding you, it was like this. I was crawling up some of this stuff. It was so difficult.

And about 15 or 20 minutes in, because I was one of the leaders, the line stopped and they called me back to the back of the line. And here this old gentleman is sitting on a big rock. He can't breathe, can't move. He's pale. We were really worried about him and we said, hey, maybe you should go back. You know, maybe you should just go back and meet us a few days later. It's okay, we're only 10 minutes in or 15 minutes in. And he said, no. He refused to do that. He wanted to finish this. And then someone entered, or should I say, someones. Two young Nepali men, probably no more than 140, 150 pounds standing off to the side started to talk to each other really rapidly, and then they said something to the third leader that was part of our trip. And all of a sudden they scurried over to this man. They divided up his pack, they put it on their shoulders, and they ran up the hill. I was jealous about the running, by the way.

And then the third man said to this older gentleman, you want to make this trip? And he said, yes, I want to make this trip. And he goes, okay, this is what we're going to do. I'm going to walk every step with you, every step. He said, but this is what you need to do. You need to listen to every word I tell you. And for the next three days, we're going to walk together and we're going to make it. I'll be honest with you, none of us really believed he was going to make it, you know? But I'll tell you something. At the end of those three days, this gentleman walked every single step with this man, and at the end we just threw a huge celebration, and this man broke into tears and hugged this young man.

Isn't it powerful when someone enters our circumstances and helps us move through some of the most dramatic things of our life? Guess what? The gospel account of John that we just heard from Reverend Bill describes the very moment where Jesus physically enters into this journey with us, this moment where Jesus is coming into our world. Humanity's trek across the mountains of life, if you will. And the gospel writer says it this way: in the beginning was the Word, was God, was Jesus. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the

Word was God." He was with God in the very beginning and all things came into being through Him. And without Him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in Him is what? Life. "And the life was the light of all people. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." That's what came into the world. That's the birth of Christ in the world, light breaking into darkness. Let me ask you something. Is there darkness in this world? Yes. Is there chaos in this world? Yes. The light came in, the One that made all things entered in.

Now, here's the cool thing about this passage. There's a deeper connection in this culture because as the Jewish culture would be hearing these words being spoken out, they would've understood what this writer was referring to. When they heard the phrase, "In the beginning," in their minds, in their ears, because it was an oral culture, not a visual culture, what they would remember is what? The very beginning of their scripture, the Torah, the very first book of Genesis, the very first book, or first words of the Bible. The first words of the Bible are what? In the beginning, God created. And they would've known that this writer was actually pushing them to the very, not just this moment where God is entering, but the moment where all things were created. They would've realized what this writer was doing.

And here's the more fascinating thing to me. We know the first words of the Bible is, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," but did you know that that's not really what the Hebrew says? The Hebrew actually says it this way. It's called a temporal clause. It says, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth," or better said, maybe when in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. This is important. Here's why. Because there is something happening before God entered into the situation. There was a process that was happening. Something was already present, and God, by entering into it, changes it.

And what was there? Well, Genesis goes on, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth," it says, "and the earth." "And the earth was welter and waste or formless and void. And darkness was over the deep and God's breath was hovering and God's spirit was hovering over the waters." One of my favorite phrases in scripture is what was just mentioned here. "The earth was formless and void, welter and waste." That phrase there is *tohu wa-bohu*. I'm going to make you say it because it's so awkward. *Tohu wa-bohu*. Say that with me. 1, 2, 3: *tohu wa-bohu*. Now yourself. 1, 2, 3. *Tohu wa-bohu*, welter and waste, formless and void. God is hovering over the earth that is formless and void and welter and waste.

And it says that God's breath and the spirit is hovering over the darkness and the deep, over the waters. Did you know that in ancient culture, water represented chaos? This is what this culture is hearing when he says in the beginning, God is entering in now. This is God hovering over the chaos and the disorder and the darkness, and then what happens? God speaks a word. God says, "Let there be light." God enters into our existence and brings forth calm to chaos, order from disorder, form to the formless, something out of nothing, light into darkness.

Years ago one of our kids came and said, "Hey Dad, I got a new tattoo I want to show you." And I was like, oh Lord. And they put their wrist out and it had Hebrew written here, and it said *tohu wa-bohu*. And I said – it's emotional. I said, "Mia, why would you put that there?" "Well, I've been through a lot, and I want to always be remembering that God is hovering over my chaos, that God is hovering over my darkness, that God is hovering over my hurt, that God is hovering over my disorder. And I know that God through people or someone or some circumstance is going to redeem this, is going to take my *tohu wa-bohu* and make something beautiful." I couldn't be mad about the tattoo. I'm sorry. I just couldn't be mad. I don't mind tattoos. I'm teasing.

Author Jennifer Bashaw says it this way. The logos, (the Word) – the logos is as these two texts in John and Genesis show, not only the creative word of God, which brought all things into being. But we learn in John's prologue that this divine word is not only the initial light-giving force behind creation, but it is also the light that shines in the darkness. In other words, the ongoing divine work in this world, this light is what will overcome the darkness or any other force that may come against it. That's Christmas. And that the Word who was with God in the very beginning has now entered our earthly existence. Bringing the very light that illuminated our world from the very beginning and yet now is illuminated even today, and do you know, even lives in each one of us now? God became what we are so that we could be made into what God is. Do you know that you hold the light of the world inside of you, that you are light in life and that light and life can be given?

One of my favorite writers and theologians, Amy Jill Levine, writes it this way: to bring light, to shine light means more than turning on a switch. It means being like God, in the act of creation. It means changing what is to something that is better. It means bringing justice, attending to where justice is lacking. It means where poverty prevents people from living fully, where exploitation exists in place of equality, where corruption exists in place of community. It means giving sight to the blind. It is the ongoing divine work of God in this world, and God's children need to be light in this world, and we get to be. And that light brings life and that light even saves lives.

On that same trip to Nepal, after our three-day trek, this group of men went down to the border where a lot of these girls are trafficked. And if you've ever been to a border between Nepal and India or anything like that, it is chaotic. I mean, there are trucks and animals and cars and people and dust and dirt and horns honking constantly. It's just absolute chaos. And this is where Ramesh and his organization set up. And they've rescued dozens of girls before they get to India because once they crossed that border, the chances of them ever surviving are nearly zero.

And if they rescue, or when they rescue these girls, many times they'll take them and try to return them to their families. But if their families reject them, which culturally sometimes that happens, they bring them into a rehabilitation home. They give them all their needs. They care for them. They introduce them to the light of Christ, they introduce them to the light of the world, and they train them in skills so that they can make a living and survive.

And one of the jobs that they get trained to do is to be border agents, helping to identify young girls that might be being harmed. And because these agents have been in this situation and they've lived in this darkness, they know the outward signs. They know how to identify those in harm's way. And so they spend their days at this border standing there dressed in a robe like I have on but purple. Tiny little girls in royalty, the color of royalty. They stand out and they look over this *tohu wa-bohu*, this chaotic sea of stuff, and they search it, all looking for eyes and looking for people that are in trouble and need light.

Believe it or not, as we were standing there that day and we're watching these women work, they spotted someone who looked vulnerable. They went to them, they approached, they started questioning her and quickly they knew she was in trouble even though this little one was too scared to tell the truth. So they took her to this little kind of makeshift guard shack that they set up on the side of the road. And in a period of time she finally confessed that she was taken over the border, she was going to be, and the traffickers were just up the street watching. They quickly alerted authorities, they whisked her way to safety.

These young women who have seen so much darkness are now beacons of God's light entering into this world. They're bringing hope, justice, liberation, life, and light to those around them. God became what we are so that we could be made into what God is. Where are your places where you can shine your light? By the way, it's not really yours. But it's been given to you through Christ entering into our existence. You may not be standing at a border in Nepal or India, but you're in a neighborhood, and guess what? God lives in you because he came close. You live in a neighborhood, so now you're close to others. Do you know that the light and the life lives in you and you are to share it, and we are to share it?

I'd like to end by praying and going back to the very beginning of our service. I don't know if you caught this, but I'm going to pray the collect of the day. It's powerful. Maybe these words will seat just a little bit deeper now. I love that you took out your programs and you're looking at it. It's beautiful. Let me read it to you.

"Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen."

Let this be so with us this Christmas. Amen.