

## “Incarnation: More Good News”

Third in a Series of Four Sermons in the Season of Creation

1 Kings 8:22-30; John 1:1-14

Most of us are familiar with the recommendation to “trust the process,” and the process for us Christians, as I said last week, is **one coherent story about God and God’s interactions with God’s world.**

Within that broad outline are three fundamental doctrines that call us to trust the God who is at work in the story: creation, incarnation, and redemption.

Do we trust that the world around us is God's good creation, rather than simply value-neutral existence?

Do we trust that God, out of love for that good creation,  
became part of it as one of us?

And do we trust that God's loving purpose for that  
creation remains intact and remains our ultimate end?

That's the coherent story we Christians tell and the story  
we trust. We trust that story because we believe it has salvific  
power, and that's the good news we have to share.

**Today we turn to the middle of that story:  
incarnation.**

We approach the topic with the Q&A provided by today's  
readings. The question is from Solomon, rhetorically asked at  
the dedication of the temple: "But will God indeed dwell on  
the earth?" And the answer comes from John: "And the Word  
became flesh and lived among us."

Will God dwell on the earth?

The Word became flesh and lived among us.

But what kind of answer is that?

The church's teachers have called it the incarnation, when the Word became flesh and lived among us, and in just a couple of months we'll be celebrating the Word becoming flesh in Mary's womb and then in the manger. And there will be greenery and there will be ribbons and there will be candles and there will be shepherds and angels and the beasts of the stall.

We will be telling that story again and celebrating that birth of the Word made flesh because creation matters. How much does creation matter? So much that God didn't merely come to earth; God became part of earth—an earthling.

We are the branch of Israel's family history that answers the question, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" with the yes of the

story of a particular baby, born at a particular time, from a particular people, in a particular place.

The Word of God had landed and was no longer speaking creation into existence. The Word of God had become a very specific part of existence.

A part of existence . . .

that could hunger.

that could thirst.

that could touch and be touched.

that could weep.

that could sweat and bleed.

that could die.

When we speak of incarnation, we are making the astonishing claim that God became part of existence in that way. The way of all flesh.

We Christians are sometimes tempted to think of the incarnation as something God began—and ended—with Jesus.

But the story of Israel tells us otherwise.

Long before one of them, Rabbi Jesus, was born under Roman occupation, God's Word was being embodied in the life of Israel. Israel was called to bless the world by showing what it means to live faithfully in God's world: seeking justice, righteousness, fairness, equity, peace, and human flourishing. God's calling of Israel, God's law, the prophets who became Israel's conscience, and finally God's becoming one of Israel's people in Jesus all belong to one story.

And that story inseparably links creation and incarnation. That linkage is not accidental—it's theological.

If God has taken flesh, then matter matters. Bodies matter. Bread matters. Water matters. The earth matters. And what we do with all of that matters.

**What we do with creation matters.**

And that's really good news, because it means that **creation isn't merely the setting for the gospel; creation is an integral part of the gospel.**

But we have disrupted the relationship between creation and good news.

The Eden story of two trees tells us that creation itself comes with limits, and that when we violate those boundaries by taking more than we have been given and need, everyone pays a price.

One part of God's creation has affected all of God's creation. That fact has been known to theologians since biblical times, but it is becoming newly vivid to many of us because of climate change.

So Paul writes that the whole creation groans in labor pains, awaiting redemption, the restoration to wholeness that has been God's loving intention all along.

And how do we know what our role is in that divine plan?

### **Incarnation.**

We look to Jesus—not simply for instructions about how to live, but for a life in which we can see what faithful human life looks like.

And that's why Jesus' favorite self-designation was simply "The Human One." The Word became flesh to show us simply what it means to be human.

A musical score can tell us what the music is supposed to be, but eventually somebody has to put fingers on keys, bow on strings, breath into an instrument. The music has to become embodied.

**And that is one way to think about incarnation: God does not simply tell us what life is supposed to be. God enters the performance of life itself.**

God has put the notes on the page for us; it's up to us, looking to Jesus, to figure out how to make that divine beauty come to life.

I want to close by asking if any of you remember how it went when you were being taught to float on your back or you were trying to teach someone else to float.

Do you remember it? For someone who's never floated on her back before, it doesn't seem possible. Water is too flimsy to support our weight. We'll sink. We'll drown. It's a disaster waiting to happen. Or so it seems.

But then somebody—a parent, a relative, a friend, a neighbor, a lifeguard, a swimming instructor—someone we trusted got in the water with us and put one hand on our shoulder and one hand in the small of our back and said, gently, “Relax and lean back and I won't let you sink. Don't tense up and don't flail your arms and don't bend in the middle. You don't even have to hold your breath. Just relax, lean back, keep breathing normally, and let me and the water support you.”

And somehow, miraculously, it did.

The water could do what water does. And the person who got into it with us could do what a trusted person does: hold us long enough for us to discover what is possible when we work together. We floated. We lay there, suspended between heaven and earth, eyes closed against the blinding sunlight and hair spreading out like a halo.

And it would never have happened had somebody not got in the water with us.

**That's incarnation.**

God gets in the water with us. God gets in the world with us. God gets in the mess with us.

**The incarnation doesn't suspend creation, it works through creation.**

That's what happened a little over two thousand years ago and it continues to shape how we see God's presence in the world today.

When people show up embodying the Word of God—kindness, compassion, integrity, faithfulness, grace, intelligence, wisdom, and so much more—when they show up with all of that flowing through their veins, steadying their brains, and leading their hearts, the stuff of creation becomes the means by which the love of God is made real, and the world no longer simply exists; it comes alive.

“I came that they may have life,” the Incarnate One said,  
“and have it abundantly.”

That life Jesus spoke of is not somewhere else—locked up in heaven, for instance, or enclosed in temple walls. It’s right here, in ordinary time and ordinary space, intended and given for ordinary people just like us.

Creation tells us that God made the world and called it good—the original good news.

Incarnation tells us that God loved that world enough to become part of it—more good news.

And redemption will tell us what God intends to do with the world that God loves—the ultimate good news.

And just as we learned to float by trusting the water and the one who got into it with us, perhaps the life of faith begins with learning to trust the presence of God already here — in this world, in these bodies, in this creation.

Maybe when we stop trying so desperately to save ourselves, we discover that a loving Presence is already holding us.

“Peace I leave with you,” Jesus said. “My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. So do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

We continue our worship with hymn number 459, “O Word of God Incarnate.”