

The Fourth Sunday in Advent 2007
State College Presbyterian Church
Dr. Charles Curley

God's Promise: Incarnation
"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
John 1:14a

John 1:1-14
Luke 2:1-16

By the fourth week in Advent, pastors are feeling a little tired – run down – worn out.

So, I thought, I have a solution.

Rather than expend the energy to write and deliver a new sermon today – I had the Church Secretary go back through our archive of worship tapes and pick out a few golden oldies!

With the help of my trusty tape recorder I will play one of them for you now – while I go downstairs and have a cup of coffee.

Joel, just push this button to turn the recorder off when the sermon is over, and you can go on with the service.

(play beginning of tape of an old sermon)

Wait a minute – that's not what I sound like, is it?

This isn't going to work at all!

(turn tape off)

I suspect that most of you have heard your voices on tape at some time. Like me, you probably thought that it didn't sound like you.

Even though the recorder was an excellent one and picked up the tone, the pitch, the rhythm of your voice perfectly -- it just didn't seem to be you.

Well, in fact, it wasn't you: at least not all of you.

For a recording is not a person.

There's something that tape just does not pick up. A presence. The way we fill space. The human element.

What we miss in a recording is the entire human presence.

The sound of a voice cries out for human form.

Now, admittedly, a tape recorder is pretty old fashioned technology.

If I were technologically up to date, I would not have to come to the church at all on Sunday morning – I could sit at home in my pajamas in front of my camera equipped computer and preach (I would make sure the camera was focused only on my face).

My giant-size image could be projected on both side walls in living color – with full surround sound.

Ned tells me that he could digitally record all the service music in advance – and play it in several churches at the same time -- or better, that there are devices which will output to piano or organ exactly what he has input to them.

We could have a thousand voice choir singing for us every Sunday.

Luciano Pavarotti as our soloist – even though he's dead!

Of course, if you were technologically up to date, you would not even be here. We would podcast our services and you could download them at home to worship at your leisure! Giving your offering by credit card, of course!

Is this the church of the future?

For most of us, thank God, probably not.

We could have all that from a machine.

But we have something better; we have persons – shapes behind the voices and sounds.

We know these people. We know the time it takes to come to practice.

We know they want to make music to the glory of God.

The sounds they make have a human dimension no device can equal – no matter how high tech.

Devices occupy space – like this tape recorder or your computer – humans shape space.

It takes human presence to shape a worship service. Who is here on any Sunday will determine the shape of how God will be worshiped. You don't believe that?

The people who are sitting beside you color your response to the service. If they weren't beside you, it would be a different service.

For example, if a wiggly child is sitting in front of you, what does it do to your worshipping? Sort of depends how you feel about children – you might be annoyed or delighted – but your experience would be different if the child was not there.

The worship of God cries out for human presence.

Which brings me to God's Promise of Incarnation.

Turns out that God used all the technology at his command to bring us the Word – and it did not work!

The Gospel of John describes this failed technology:

When all things began, the Word already was.
The word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was.
The Word, then was with God at the beginning,
and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him.
All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of humankind.

John is saying that God created the whole world of nature – the beauty of mountains, the power of a storm, the glory of plant and animal – God created the whole world of nature to speak God's Word to us.

But, John goes on to say -- it didn't work all that well.

It was as if we treated God's speaking like a tape.

God's creation is like music in the elevator -- a kind of background for more important matters, but not very convincing on its own.

We just didn't respond the way God hoped to that Word of God.

The witness of nature was not enough.

John puts it like this:

The word was in the world, but the world,
though it owed its being to him, did not recognize him.

The world, our world, has been very efficient at ignoring God's Word.

We didn't hear the Word in God's creation. So God tried speaking to us through Abraham, Moses and the prophets.

We managed to ignore them too!

God must have been a little frustrated working through the prophets.

In the prophets, God still had to depend on an instrument outside of himself, even though human.

People could still listen to the prophets, but not see God. They could dismiss the prophets.

"Prophet, you are mixed up in the head. Give us proof you speak for God. Give us a sign. Give us another sign. "

God's Word was in the world through creation, through the prophets, even through the history of Israel, but the world did not recognize it was God.

It was then that God's Word became a human presence.

God came to dwell among us, John says, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

What we are celebrating in Advent is that God uses no more technology.

God becomes a person.

A human presence.

God moves toward us in a new way -- as only a human presence can -- as different from the way God came before as I am from a tape recorder

And we can respond to God in a new way. Not God out there.

But as a human presence who shapes the space of our lives.

This is the beginning of the Promise of Incarnation. In itself, that's a lot of reason to celebrate.

But John did not stop there. He has one more part of the promise for us.

But to all who did receive God's speaking made flesh, to those who have yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become children of God, not born of any human flesh, but the offspring of God.

This is the Promise of Incarnation.

Not only that God came to us in human form, but that God is in our human form!

The offspring of God.

Us.

Through Christ we give new shape to the world.

We are no longer instruments used by an outside force.

Christ, the very living Word, dwells with and in us.

Our human presence is now Christ's presence.

God is born again and again in us: in "all those who have yielded God their allegiance."

The Word of God cries out for human form – our human form!

Of all the ways God could have chosen to move across the holy space to us, he sought us in a human form. In a child, then a man.

But Jesus died. On a cross. Rose and ascended to heaven.

Where is the human presence of God now?

If God's Word is to shape the world, where is the Word made flesh now?

You see where John has led us, don't you?

If we do not gather to worship one human with another, then how will the Word of God come in human form to the world?

If we do not stretch out our hand in Christ's name one human to another, then how will God's broken world be healed?

How can a person respond totally to God unless there is another human presence to engage around the Word?

If it isn't us, if we are not the human presence of God in this world, then we might as well go home and play the tape.

John has drawn us to God's Promise of Incarnation: an astounding opportunity!

to those who have yielded him their allegiance,
he gave the right to become children of God.

Us -- the presence of God. In community. In life.

We offer our human presence in and through the Word.

The Promise of the Incarnation – fulfilled again and again!

In us.

Amen.