

Have You Heard the Word, Bird?
A Message by Janet Culbertson
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Opening Prayer: **from UMH #255 for Epiphany**

O God, you made of one blood all nations, and, by a star in the East, revealed to all peoples him whose name is Emmanuel.

Enable us who know your presence with us so to proclaim his unsearchable riches that all may come to his light and bow before the brightness of his rising, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. **Amen.**

Hymn: **The First Noel #245**

Joys and Concerns:

From Lynn, her granddaughter-in-law's grandfather Jack who was suffering from Covid has passed away. Please keep Jack's family in your prayers for comfort and peace.

From Wanda, her Aunt Nancy was diagnosed with breast cancer, both breasts. She was scheduled for bilateral mastectomy this Wednesday, December 30. Prayers her surgeon was able to remove all cancer and successful recovery for her.

Also from Wanda, her cousin Nancy and her husband Jerry both have COVID-19. Jerry has been fighting it for over two weeks, Nancy over a week. Prayers for both of them to recover soon.

From Pastor Janet. Her husband John was diagnosed positive for Covid and now she is exhibiting symptoms of having it too. Please pray for a quick recovery for Janet and her whole family and that she can get plenty of rest!

The Written Word: **John 1:6-14 (MSG)**

There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light.

He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in.

John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light.

He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice.

He came to his own people, but they didn't want him.

But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said,

He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.

These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son,

Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

The Spoken Word: **Have You Heard the Word, Bird?**

He was not a Scrooge. He was a good and decent man, generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others. But as a modern thinker seeking complex answers to life situations, he just could not accept the simple story of Christmas, the "God born in a manger" story. To

him, the incarnation stuff the church espoused was beyond belief. It just didn't make sense, and he was too honest to pretend that he believed what he didn't.

On Christmas eve, as the family was preparing to leave for a midnight service of candles and Carol's at the nearby church, he informed them he would not be going. "I'd be a hypocrite!" he said. So, he stayed, and they went.

Shortly after they'd gone, Snow began to fall. He stood by the window in the front room and watched the flakes grow bigger and bigger before retiring to his fireside chair to read the newspaper. Moments later he was startled by a loud thunk. Then another. And still another. "Kids throwing snowballs," he thought to himself. Yet it didn't exactly sound like snowballs. And besides, what kids would be playing at that time of night? Going to the door and opening it, he saw a flock of birds huddled miserably in the deepening snow. They had apparently been caught in the unexpected snowstorm, and in an effort to find shelter had tried to fly through the large picture window.

What to do? He couldn't just let them lie there. But what could he do? Then, with a flash of inspiration, he thought of the barn where the kids stabled their pony beside the house. That would provide a safe, warm place.

Grabbing his coat, he walked outside to the old barn and threw open the creaking wooden doors. He turned on the light. But the birds did not go in. "Food!" He said out loud. "Food would entice them." So, running back to the house, he found some breadcrumbs his wife was planning to use to make croutons for the big meal the next day. He proceeded to make a trail of bread leading to the barn. Still, the birds fly around inattentively. He tried catching them. He tried shooing them by walking all around them, waving his arms. But they scattered in every direction except toward the open barn door.

Then it dawned on him: "They are afraid of me. To them I am a strange, mysterious creature. If only I could tell them I'm trying to help – that they can trust me. If only I could mingle with them and speak their language. If only I could become a bird so they could hear, see, and understand – maybe then they would follow me into the safe warm barn."

Just then he heard the church bells in the distance ringing out the tune to the familiar Carol, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" It seemed like a message meant just for him. His doubts melted in a flame of insight, and he fell to his knees in the snow.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

I love that modern-day parable, which defines in simple language what the Incarnation means.

On this Sunday that launches us into the new year, I want us to continue to embrace God's Christmas salvation. I invite you to cradle like a newborn baby the truth of the magnificent message and clutch the nuances of its tender, yet powerful reality.

What we read in the first chapter of John's Gospel is full of meaning for all people. Risking rejection, God accommodated himself to his people's request. The Word became flesh. The Message became a man.

The idea of God becoming man is as ancient as 4000 year-old Babylonian myths. Slightly more recently, in 1977, a hilarious Hollywood comedy came out that gave an old wrinkled

worn-out comedian by the name of George Burns a fresh career. Do you remember the movie “Oh God?” It’s hard to believe that was 43 years ago. It’s theology wasn’t quite Orthodox, but I’ve got to tell you that there was enough biblical truth to force it’s way into our sometimes misinformed view of the incarnation. It was a fun film. In the movie, God (George Burns) appears to an assistant manager in a Los Angeles supermarket. He’s dressed in tennis shoes and a fishing cap. “I picked a look you could understand.” explains the Almighty. And that is about as orthodox as you can get when it comes to explaining what happened in Bethlehem.

Christ came to earth with a look we could understand. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” A literal translation says the word became flesh “and pitched his tent among us.” He came to us as one of us. Granted, Jesus didn’t come wearing a fishing cap. But he hung around a group of men who did! He probably even smelled of fish. His hands were calloused from years of handling lumber. His skin was tanned from the middle eastern sun. If the technology had existed at the time, we could have taken video of him, or made a recording of his voice. Jesus was in every sense human as we are.

Jesus was totally God, too. We Christians have little difficulty with that part. But we often ignore that he was wholly man. Interestingly enough, Jesus humanness was of paramount importance to the apostles in their attempt to document the trustworthiness of the gospel. John reflects this in his first epistle, which begins with these words: “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the word of life” (1 John: 1:1).

He was human in every way we are. The incarnation not only means we understand God better because he has revealed himself, but that God identifies with us humans, because he became one of us. The temptations Jesus faced while in the wilderness were by no means the only temptations he struggled with in his life. Scripture tells us he was tempted in every way we are, yet he never gave in.

He knew what it was like to be hungry. He could identify easily with half the population of today’s world, lying awake at night with hunger pains; he went 40 days without food in the desert. Jesus encountered sexual temptation. Jesus also knew what it was like to be lonely. He knew the ache that gnaws in the hearts of those who long for friendship. He once spent more than a month completely isolated from any other human being. At a time when he really needed companionship, he was deserted by those who claimed to be his closest friends. He knew what it was like to be a single person in a society in which marriage was the norm.

Jesus understood the human desire to succeed at the expense of going against God’s will. He literally sweat blood under what seems to be the pressure he felt to continue his growing ministry instead of facing the cross. Ultimately, Jesus knew the meaning of suffering. Jesus felt the anxiety of those bereaved survivors of loved ones recently deceased, those suffering through a broken marriage, those wrestling with recent diagnoses of a terminal illness, and those whose grown children have chosen to walk away from the values on which they were raised. Jesus experienced first-hand the agony of intense physical pain. He was acquainted with grief. The prophet Isaiah called him “a man of sorrows.” He, too, suffered the uncertainty of death.

But note how the apostle John continued: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father”

(vs. 14). As flesh, Christ lived where we live. He sat where we sit. He identified with our point of need. But there is more: As the son of God, he lives today, interceding on our behalf before the Father. Because he came to this world as a man, he knows how to pray for us and how to help us. The writer of Hebrews wrote, “Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted... So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it” (Hebrews 2:18, 4:16).

That is the magnificent message of God’s Christmas salvation. The message once misunderstood has been translated into a language we can understand. God came into our world. He has come into our little worlds and circles of concern. There is nothing that concerns us that he doesn’t know about. Doesn’t that provide enough hope with which to begin a new year?

We’ve spent the past month identifying the significance of the names we call Christ: King, Savior, Emmanuel and the Light of the World. Let’s briefly look at just one more name: Lord. As the early Christians said, “Jesus is Lord,” they were saying, “Jesus is the highest authority in my Life. He is my Master, Ruler, Commander and King.” Lord was not simply a name they used to address Jesus; it was a title that reflected their submission to his will. Are you daily yielding your life to Christ?

Advent and Christmas are meant to call us to a lifelong journey of daily offering our lives to Christ, our Lord, Heavens Gift to All Nations?

Christmas is not something that only happens once a year; the Son of God is continually being incarnated in this world through his people. Our life can have deep meaning if we keep practicing what we’ve learned this advent season.

I have one more gift for you. It is the gift of space, and it is more valuable than you might first think. It is an expectant pause, a break in time, slow motion and movement. A few uninterrupted seconds in which to ponder the year now past.

Go ahead, Close your eyes. Say so long to the regrets and disappointments of the last 12 months. Thank the Lord for what you have accomplished or received. Distance yourself from those things you wish had been different this Christmas. **(30 seconds of silence.)**

Now, before you let go of that Little space hold a few seconds longer spend a quiet moment asking the Lord to help you leave yesterday behind and confidently face today and tomorrow and the days after that. Thank him that because of Christmas he is Emmanuel, God with us. **(Pause to pray.)**

So, what is your need today? What storm in your life finds you huddled miserably in the cold? Whatever it is, the one who came to us as one of us invites us all to come boldly to him. He’s not a strange and mysterious creature as the man seemed to the birds when he was trying to save them. Jesus is approachable and loving. He entered our world to lead us out of life’s storms and into the safety of his warm, secure kingdom. He has opened the door, turned on the light of truth, and now he stands at the gate of this new year bidding us to come in. Let us enter into the joy of his salvation.

Please allow me to pray for you:

May this joy see yours as you hail Jesus as your Christ, your Messiah, your King. May you taste of the hope and mercy he offers as you receive him as your savior. May you feel his peace as you accept that he is your Emmanuel. May you hear him as God's definitive Word to you, even as you allow his light to dwell in you and be reflected through you. May he be your Lord; guiding, leading, and directing your path. Amen.

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING FOR NEW YEAR

The Lord be with you. We lift up our hearts to the Lord.

It is right to give our thanks and praise. It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty (almighty God), creator of heaven and earth.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth, from everlasting to everlasting, you alone are God.

You created light out of darkness and brought forth life on the earth.

You formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life.

When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast.

You delivered us from captivity, made covenant to be our sovereign God, and spoke to us through your prophets.

And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ, in whom you have revealed yourself, our light and our salvation.

[You sent a star to guide wise men to where the Christ was born; and in your signs and witnesses, in every age and through all the world, you have led your people from far places to his light.]

By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:

"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:

"Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine.

Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father (God), now and forever. **Amen.**

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