



*The Story We Live By*  
December 27, 2020: The First Sunday After Christmas  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight oh Lord our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

MERRY CHRISTMAS! We can say this to one another for 12 days, you know!

How many of us received something from LL Bean for Christmas this year? How many of us gave something from LL Bean? How many of us own something from LL Bean? We in our family are loyal customers and have been since I was a child, when we would visit the flagship store in Freeport in the middle of the night on our summer vacations to Maine.

I was in their Burlington store about 10 years ago or so, and who was there but Leon Gorman, the grandson of LL Bean, the founder. He was signing a book he had written about the company, published by Harvard Business School Press to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the company. The book was called *LL Bean: The Making of an American Icon*. It tells the story of how the company grew from a small, simple store that sold an excellent leather and rubber boot, to a 1-billion-dollar enterprise, whose brand is one of the most respected in the world of corporate retail. The challenge was to balance tradition with change and to base a business on bedrock values.

Now, I suppose I could draw some kind of extended parallel between the birth of a small child in a manger and the emergence of great world religion, and the opening of a small store in Maine and the growth of a billion-dollar company. But I won't.

What really caught my eye was the blurb that was featured as part of the publicity campaign: It's a quote from the book, and it is this: "It's what sets us apart from all the others. *Not* just that we *have* a story, but that we *live* by it."

We have a story as Christians.

It comes from the Scriptures and through our traditions. We hear it, for example, in our Eucharistic Prayers. Here's one of them, addressed to God, from *Enriching our Worship*: "From before time, you made ready the creation. Your Spirit moved over the deep and brought all things into being: sun, moon, and stars; earth, winds, and waters; and every living thing. You made us in your image and taught us to walk in your ways. But we rebelled against you, and wandered far away; and yet, as a mother cares for her children, you would not forget us. Time and again you called us to live in the fullness of your love." (p. 60)

Or this one, from Prayer B in the Prayer Book: You made known to us your goodness and love in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son. For in these last days, you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into



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righteousness, out of death into life....” (p. 368) In this season of Church year, we savor the precious part of our Christian Story that is the Incarnation—this is the Christmas story.

We also have stories as individual Christians: Who are we? Where do we come from? Who made us who we are? Who do we love? What matters to us? How did we find ourselves on-line this morning? How do we find ourselves connected with Christ Episcopal Church in Needham? How did we find ourselves in the Episcopal Church? How did we find ourselves in any church at all? And once we are here amidst the beliefs, rituals, and practices, of this story, we might ask ourselves, how well do we live the story of *our* lives by the light of the Christian story?

As I approached this Gospel text, I couldn't help but think back to the quote from a history of a successful business: “Not that we have a story, but that we live by that story.” Because this Sunday's gospel is a critical part of our story, the Christian story. “The Word became flesh and lived among us,” says the Gospel of John to us this morning. And older version says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (King James Version) Another version, homespun: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

And I ask myself again: how well do we live our lives by the Christian Story, and in particular, this chapter of the Christian story? “The Word became Flesh and Lived among us.” On one level, this phrase is the testimony, seasoned by theological reflection, from those who had experienced the unique and unrepeatable Resurrection of this same Jesus as well as his remarkable life. The purpose of the Gospel of John is to record this testimony.

And it has been the Christian Church's proclamation for centuries: beginning with John, that Christ was God. That through Christ, God created the world. This has been a crucial part of our story.

Now what exactly it means to say that *Jesus is God* has been the subject of debate for centuries. As just one, brief example, we can tell that that has been a contentious question when we look at the central portion of the ancient Nicene Creed, which we will say in a moment: look at all the words used to try to spell that relationship out. Even in the much shorter, ancient Apostles' Creed, the lion's share of the words are there to try to define who Jesus is in relationship with God.

But what does it mean *today* to live by the piece of the story that says the Word became flesh and lived among us?

A few years ago, I heard a man who had worked with Mother Teresa give a talk about that experience. At the end of each day, Mother Teresa had a question for her sisters and the other visiting volunteers who worked with the sick and destitute of Calcutta: “Have you seen the face of my Jesus in the poor today?” This question has lingered with me. And as I reflect on that question, perhaps I need to alter the Bible verse a bit—The Word *becomes* flesh and *lives* among us. Do we order our lives by this phrase?



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It may take some repeated acts of imagination. But I think to live by this part of our story—that the Word became, and *becomes*, flesh; and lived and *lives* among us—requires us to see each and every human being as, in some way, the face of Jesus.

The implications of that are huge. For those of us whose daily labors do not have us working with the desperately poor, we might need to rephrase the question: Have we seen the face of Jesus today in the person who most infuriates us? Have we seen the face of my Jesus today in the person who most frightens us? Have we seen the face of my Jesus today in the person who most saddens us? Have we seen the face of Jesus in those closest to us whom we may take for granted? Have we seen the face of Jesus in those who give us great joy?

*The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.*

How well do we order our lives by this phrase?

The Christmas Holidays may offer multiple chances to live by this part of our story. The holidays have a way of reviving the harder parts of our own stories into instruments of combat. And cold wars, or hot wars in these contexts, allow us the opportunity to practice seeing Christ in the face of our neighbor, who also happens to be a brother or sister, mother-in-law, cousin, long-lost son. Perhaps COVID has mitigated somewhat the kinds of gatherings where these opportunities take place. But they will be back.

The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

There's a person who comes with some regularity to our Church asking for help.

This person lives in another town but has come to find that we can be helpful, with food cards, with rent, and the like. I'll call this person Robin. Robin is sixteen years sober and has shown me the sobriety tokens received at various milestones. Pat suffers from PTSD incurred in Vietnam. Robin has had trouble holding on to a job. Pat only has the skills of a laborer, and in a body that is over six decades old, that's a fair amount of wear and tear. Robin doesn't have a car, which can make it harder to get a job. Though we have some guidelines around how often we can give people help— we want to be good stewards of the Rector's Discretionary Fund, after all— Robin ignores them. And so Pat calls and comes around.

I sometimes want to avoid Robin. I want to avoid seeing the face of Christ in Robin. What if Robin is pulling one over on me? What if Robin is exploiting me and the generosity of those who give me funds for the RDF? What if I am betraying my baptismal vows, and ordination vows, by avoiding even having a conversation with him, when I might have to say, "Robin, I'm sorry, you've been here too many times recently. You'll need to check back in a few months."



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Whenever I have an interaction with Robin, I'm reminded how important it is to carry this part of our story around with us and live by it: "The Word becomes flesh and lives among us." That the Christ is present in *every* human being, and that makes every human being precious, worthy of dignity and respect.

The birth of that little baby in Bethlehem, which we honor as a precious part of our story, serves as a reminder, that *every* human being bears the imprint of the Word who became flesh, who becomes flesh, and lives among us.

**Amen.**