

Sermon – John 1:1-14
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Grace Lutheran Church
Christmas – Year A
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“The Word Made Flesh”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The other day, I heard of a congregation in Missouri that recently had two funerals, close together, for longtime members and dear saints on the church, Mary and Shirley. Mary's service was first, with Shirley's following a few days later. As it turned out, they had similar requests regarding readings and hymns. The bulletins would be nearly identical, other than their names. So, whoever in that congregation is in charge of preparing the bulletins made a decision. Why prepare Shirley's bulletin from scratch? Instead, they decided to let AI do the job. They utilized one or another tool, ChatGPT I assume, and told it to make Mary's service into one for Shirley. On first glance, all seemed well. There was Shirley's name, right where it was supposed to be. In the prayers, in the commendation. It was only just before the service was set to begin that the vicar noticed an issue. He crossed the chancel and whispered to the pastor, who responded by standing up and grabbing bulletins out of as many hands as he could. It seems that, right there during the funeral liturgy, they were about to confess their faith in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Shirley. I do want to take a moment to assure you that this is, to the best of my knowledge, a true story. Not that I think that you would think that I would ever, you know, engineer a joke for a sermon. This one's true!

2. It is not for me to offer an ethical investigation about the uses of artificial intelligence, at least not right now. Although, hey, humanity, be careful here. But whether AI ends up being a useful tool that makes silly mistakes or instead conquers the world and installs robots as our overlords, one thing is clear: The A will always be part of the I. I will always be *artificial* intelligence. It will never be human. Which is fine, of course. It's simply to say that, whether AI is a blessing and a curse, it, like all of our tools, can never save us, for it will never be one of us. Only One of us like us can save us, which leaves us in a bit of a lurch, of course, because not one of us is not in need of saving.
3. Which brings us back to Mary and her baby boy. Last night, in this room and around the world, we heard again of the journey to Bethlehem, the angels and the shepherds, the new parents gathered around the manger in wonder, and their little child who is Savior and Messiah. Today, we enter the Christmas story from another vantage point. John zooms out from Bethlehem and goes back to the beginning. John's prologue invites us to remember the genesis of all things, of God moving in the darkness, Spirit upon the deep, bringing worlds into being through words alone. God speaks, and it is so. But John the Evangelist tells us that these words are not alike to our words, that these words are not simply spoken by God. These words are *the Word*, in whom and through whom all things have come into being.
4. One might reasonably expect that the Word who creates worlds would keep ours, so broken and benighted, at a safe distance. But John proclaims the most wondrous, surprising thing: The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. The wonder of the Incarnation is that God has joined Godself to humanity, fully and freely, forever. As Pastor Roger Nelson writes in *The Christian Century*, "the wonder of Christmas is that we gather not just for an idea, creed, or confession, not just for music and family traditions, however beautiful. We gather together because in a particular place, at a particular time, God became mass and matter, took on cells and

cellulose. We gather,” Nelson concludes, “in the mystery that God slipped in among us.” We, friends, trapped in cycles or sin and violence, sickness and suffering, sorrow and death; we, who have – by our own fault and through the fault of others – become *less* human than we were made to be, look and behold the most wondrous thing. The Word has become flesh. Jesus, God-among-us, is truly human. And in his living, dying, and rising, we become truly human, too. We wake on this Christmas morning to a dual reality. On the one hand, nothing is different. Sin and suffering roll on. Death still stalks us. On the other hand, nothing is the same. Nor will it be ever again. God in Christ has refused to stay far off. There is nothing artificial about Jesus, Son of Mary and Son of God, this Light that forever shines in every darkness, that shows forth death to be nothing more now than an empty shell.

5. Though this day has dawned, this world’s night is not yet passed. But everything is different, for God has refused to stay far off. As Christ has joined himself to our suffering world, so, too, does he join us to God’s coming Kingdom. If we remain in the “not yet,” we also live in the anticipated “already.” Or, as the poet Anne Brontë writes:

Though Darkness still her empire keep,
And hours must pass, ere morning break;
From troubled dreams, or slumbers deep,
That music kindly bids us wake:
It call us with an angel’s voice,
To wake, and worship, and rejoice.

6. Friends, let us wake, and worship, and rejoice, for the Word and become flesh. Judgment has given way to grace and mercy. The God who seemed far off is now anything but. Christ is here, now, present for you, in Word and sacrament, lived out in prayer and song and service to others. God, true God, is present with and for you, now and forever. In Jesus, you are now finally

and fully human, too, joined to the divine light of Christ, in this world and the next, world without end. God in Christ has become one of us. God in Christ has saved us. God in Christ is with us, now and forever. Merry Christmas!
Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.