



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

**An Aunt of Mine Who Lives in New Hampshire**  
**The First Sunday after Christmas**  
**Sunday, December 27, 2020**  
**The Rev. Paul McLain**

'The Word became flesh and lived among us.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
*Amen.*

Phillips Brooks, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Episcopal bishop in Massachusetts who wrote the Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," was once asked what he considered the greatest proof of the truth of Christianity. Bishop Brooks is considered one of the greatest Episcopal preachers of all time. And 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' is a masterpiece among the Christmas carols. He was an artist with words, and I can imagine his questioner expecting Bishop Brooks to give his answer by weaving together Holy Scripture and philosophy in a masterful and eloquent proof of Christianity. Do you know what his answer was? "An aunt of mine who lives in New Hampshire." Instead of using a lot of words, Bishop Brooks pointed to a flesh-and-blood person, his aunt, as the proof that Christianity is true.

John writes that, in Jesus, "The Word became flesh." In the Gospel of John, the Christmas story goes far beyond shepherds and stables, and hearkens us back to the very beginning. This Word was present at the beginning with God, and in fact, was God.

This Word is far more than letters of the alphabet put together to form thoughts so that they can be communicated. I think we often hope for a manual filled with words to pinpoint a direction for our lives. While scripture offers much wisdom and direction, it really points us to the Word with a capital "W," that is the very person of God. This Word is the agent for all of creation. This Word is the dynamic force that gives life to us. This Word is the light of all people that shines through the darkness.

In celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas, we are celebrating much more than the birth of a baby over 2,000 years ago. We are celebrating nothing less than the incarnation of God into humanity. Incarnation means embodiment – the Word becoming flesh.

In the Christ child, God not only came to die for us, but came to live for us and as one of us –  
to grow from a baby to an adult,  
to experience and resist temptation,  
to learn and to teach,  
to feed, to heal, to help,  
to cry for a friend.

Instead of just a manual of words, we are given the Word as a life, the life of Jesus. And Jesus is the model of how we are to live our lives. But he is far more than this.

John writes that all who receive Jesus, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God. What this means is that the incarnation extends beyond the Word becoming flesh in the person of Jesus. Through Jesus, the incarnation extends to each one of us. It is God's understanding that there is a hole in our world that can only be filled with grace. But this grace cannot be just a platitude. It has to be something or someone alive, not only to fill the gaping holes in our hearts, but to grow and to beat within them, to become our animating life force of healing and hope. Out of sheer love, God gives us the greatest gift of all. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. And the Word, Jesus, lives within us and grows within us.

For Bishop Phillips Brooks, it was the recognition of this incarnate presence of Christ in the life of his aunt in New Hampshire that was his proof that Christianity is true. I wonder what he saw in her.

Perhaps it was her genuine concern for others.

Perhaps it was her faithfulness and humility.

Perhaps it was her life of prayer.

Perhaps it was the inexplicable light shining through her eyes, radiating the lives of those around her.

I believe that each one of us can think of a person that so embodies Christ to be our proof of the truth of Christianity.

One of the most poignant parts of 2020 has been watching the In Memoriam segment at the end of the Friday night editions of the PBS NewsHour. In it, we see photographs and learn the stories of five people who died from COVID-19. Each week, I wish I had known every one of these people. And for a few moments, I do know them and I hurt. Through their simple love for family, friends, community, their sense of humor, and their deep sense of caring, they show me the spark of the divine each week.

I see that spark of the divine in the all too many persons who have died from our Calvary congregation in 2020. And I see that spark of the divine in each of you - in the ways you have checked on one another, dropped off meals at doorsteps, been flexible and creative in our new ways of worship, and have lifted up countless, heartfelt prayers for so many.

As we gladly and mercifully move into 2021 this week, I hope that we will bring forward the spirit of deep caring, the respect and empathy we have for our shared mortality, and the examples and hearts of the many we loved and lost - into who we are and how we live in this new year. For even in the midst of this difficult year, the Word has still become flesh, and the Light has still overcome the darkness. As we enter this long-awaited, much-anticipated new year, may the incarnate light of Jesus shine through us as we become the proof of his truth. *Amen.*