

I do welcome you to First Presbyterian Church on this Christmas Eve. I am grateful tonight to be sharing in worship with our friends at First United Presbyterian Church – including their new pastor, the Reverend Delton Farmer. Delton we welcome you to Charlotte and are grateful to be your partners in ministry here.

Some of you are in town visiting relatives. Some of you are watching this from home – either now on our live stream, or at 11:00 pm on channels 9 and 64. We are glad you are joining us. Some of you are here for the first time...some for the first time in a while...we’re glad you are here. I know some of you are spending the holiday with newly minted in-laws (or soon to be in-laws)...good luck with that, I hope it goes well.

I remember when I first celebrated Christmas with my in-laws 22 Christmases ago (my in-laws are now members of our church...hey guys!). We had a great time – and they didn’t kick me out of the family or anything – but it was a reminder that this season...so packed with expectation and tradition and memory...comes with certain things that we *need* to make it *feel* like Christmas.

For a lot of us, part of Christmas is connected to our taste buds and our stomachs. What I came to realize on that first Christmas with my in-laws was that – for me – Christmas tasted like sweet potato casserole with pecans and brown sugar on top...not marshmallows...and that Christmas tasted like my grandmother’s meringue cookies with crushed pecans and almond extract...not chocolate crinkles. Don’t get me wrong...I don’t have anything against my mother-in-law’s sweet potato casserole or chocolate cookies...they’re delicious...and now they are a part of the standard-fare...but that year, my taste-buds told me Christmas was missing something.

Maybe you gathered with family or friends leading up to Christmas this year and watched a favorite movie. We watched Home Alone for the 59<sup>th</sup> time at my house this week...it’s part of our Christmas tradition. Maybe you watched Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, or Elf, or National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation...or, everyone’s favorite holiday movie, Die Hard.

Sometimes it’s music. Did you know Mariah Carey’s All I Want for Christmas is tops on the billboard charts *again* this year...29 years after it was released? There’s a whole generation who associate with that high A with the Christmas miracle. For others, it’s a service of lessons and carols...or Singing in the Season...or a favorite hymn that makes the season feel special.

Of course, it’s the giving and receiving of gifts...and the planning and fun of anticipation around that.

But you all have come here – to church – on Christmas Eve – I suspect...in part...because you feel that it wouldn’t be Christmas without the story...the reminder of how it began...over 2,000 years ago...when a man named Joseph took his strangely (and divinely) pregnant fiancé named Mary to be counted in Bethlehem...and

how, while there, God broke into the world in the person of Jesus...who Mary wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger...because there was no room for them in the Inn.

Christmas has become many things...a holiday, a season, a tradition...but on a fundamental level, Christmas is a **commitment**...God’s commitment to be with us...in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

I’ve thought about what from Scripture we might need to hear, gathered in the sanctuary, on this night to help us **feel** like it is Christmas. I doubt that I am alone in naming that what I need...in a world that can feel on-edge and fraught...is a word of hope and assurance.

On this Christmas Eve, we find that word in the gospel of John. Before I read it, please join me in prayer:  
*Still, still, still our busy minds, O God – that from a place of rushing around in preparation for all that Christmas represents, we might ground ourselves in your word...to appreciate your promise, to celebrate your commitment, and to trust in the presence of your love. By your Holy Spirit, open our ears, hearts, and minds to hear your truth in Scripture. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.*

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

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Christmas isn’t celebrated in Bethlehem  
It’s not the words.  
Words are important – sure.

The sermons that have been preached and that will be preached from this pulpit are a critical piece of the ministry of the gospel that goes on in this place.

But in the final analysis – words are not enough.

And so it was that – when the time was right – our God moved beyond words to show us the depth of his love.

John says:

*And the Word became flesh and [dwelled] among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

Do you want to know what love looks like?

Do you want to know about the love that God has for each of us?

Consider the fact that the decision to put on flesh and enter the world that God had created was just that – a decision.

A choice.

*The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.*

Among the places and among the people that were a far cry from the vision that God intended and among the places and the people who were in desperate need of grace.

*The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.*

Into a world where there is embarrassing inequality.

And random and senseless violence, like the kind we saw this week in Colorado.

And car accidents.

And cancer.

*The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.*

Into a world that is complicated.

And beautiful.

And broken.

And bruised.

And full of potential.

Through the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, God chose to enter the fabric of this world in order to redeem it and change it and honor it and bless it.

There is a temptation in the Church, I think, to misunderstand the purpose of words.

Too often, church folks view the purpose of words to be the building blocks we use to construct the walls that set our Christian faith or our brand of Christian faith over and against something else.

In more church meetings than I care to recall I have spent time fighting over words that define, or restrict, or distinguish what Christ’s body will be or will not be.

Like the world around us, the Church uses words to send signals about who is invited to our club. We are guilty (I am guilty) of hiding behind church-y words that people who are not like us do not understand – which serves as an effective guard against changing the status quo.

On the cover of your bulletin there is a picture that used to hang in the study of a man named Karl Barth – a professor and theologian who was instrumental in shaping what people in our branch of the Christian faith believe.

In the painting, John the Baptist is the figure to the right of the cross who is standing with an open Bible, pointing to the crucified Christ.

Barth’s interpretation of that picture is that the words that we use – whether they be the unique and authoritative words of the Bible or the words that the church or church people use to talk about our faith – the words we use are for the purpose of pointing toward the One who loved us so much that he stepped into the messiness of the world and gave up his life when words were not enough.

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The church-y word for that is incarnation.

We usually only talk about incarnation at Christmas when we celebrate the birth and beginning of this incredible gift that is God in the flesh – but in a day and age when people are hungry for an experience of God and are skeptical of that which is not authentic and real – I think it is critical that the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ be incarnational...that our faith needs to be grounded and practiced in real life.

And so, my hope for us...for you...is that the ministry of First Presbyterian Church or Shreveport, Louisiana will not exist on the page.

I hope that the good news of the gospel will not be limited to the words that are spoken from this pulpit.

Or from the carefully constructed communications of committees.

Instead, I hope that what God is doing through 900 Jordan Street will be evidenced by a faith that is real-world, rolled-up-sleeves, neighbor-to-neighbor, honest, vulnerable, hospitable, and humble.

And what I know is that this hope will be realized because I have seen you practice this kind of faith.

I have seen the way you love one another –  
Holding each other up in times of sorrow.  
Supporting one another through times of trial.

I have experienced the welcome of this community –

And hear more often that you would believe from people near and far who have experience the same kind of welcome.

I know of your continuing commitment to give yourselves away in service –

Not just through the well-known stories of the past, but through innovative ideas that have taken root in the present and through creative dreams for ministry that God is, even now, shaping for the future.

I have witnessed you embrace change – not for the sake of change – but in order to respond more faithfully to the places where the gospel needs to be lived out so that we can reach people who are not familiar or altogether comfortable with the church of the past.

Yes, you are practiced in the art of incarnational ministry – of embodying the good news of Jesus Christ –

and I firmly believe – with all of my heart – that the future of Christ’s church will be found in communities like this one who can continue to find the courage to follow the Word out into the world.