

## **“The Word Made Flesh”**

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**New Testament Lesson:** Luke 1:67-79

**Old Testament Lesson:** Malachi 3:1-4

Grandma will be 95 years old soon, “said Teri. It shouldn’t surprise me that she didn’t know who I was when I saw her last ... – but it did. She knew me (last) Christmas. Was the marked decline because they had moved her from assisted living to nursing care or had they moved her because of the decline? I guess it really doesn’t matter – she still didn’t remember me.”

As Teri and her grandmother sat talking about the insignificant stuff you talk about with people you don’t really know, Teri laid her hand on grandma’s back. “She immediately leaned forward” said Teri, and as I started rubbing her back she began smiling and purring. When it was time to go, she asked me to come again soon.

The next day when I arrived at her door, she looked up and smiled. “Good morning, Grandma,” I said. “Do you remember me today?” “Of course I do,” she replied indignantly. “You are the woman who rubs my back.” I guess sometimes what I do said Teri, is more important than who I am.

This story was told by Pastor Teri Thomas at National Capital Presbytery in Maryland (Thursday Mail, May 3, 2000). It’s a good reminder of what Zachariah is telling us in today’s New Testament lesson – that with God, what we do is more important than who we are. God speaks to us and works through us with actions, not mere thoughts or desires.

In fact, it is really only God’s desire that matters here. Or at least, that’s how it should be, for those who wish to be blessed with the greatest gift of all this Christmas, and every day.

God’s desire is that we be his people, his beloved children, united as brothers and sisters in Christ, following the Spirit and teaching of Jesus, in all that we do. Of course, we don’t. We don’t follow Jesus in all that we do. We don’t even look to Jesus in all that we do.

The reason we fail to look to and follow Jesus is because we forget. We forget that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. We forget that we are God’s people – we belong to God – not to ourselves, not to our jobs, not to our classrooms, not even to our families, apart from God. Apart from God, we are nothing. It has been this way for eons, from the beginning of time, when the first man and the first woman asserted their will over and against God’s will. We had a problem interacting with God.

But not now. Now that God has sent Jesus Christ, his word made flesh, we have no problem interacting with God.

Well, that's not exactly true, is it? I mean if we really had no problem interacting with God, would we yell at each other like we do, would we ignore each other like we do, would we hurt each other like we do, would we go to war against each other like we do?

It's not easy being God's people, God's beloved children, brothers and sisters united in Christ. It's not easy, but it is possible.

It is possible for you and for me to be more aligned with God's will, to be more receiving of God's love – like a child – to be more united in Christ, like brothers and sisters in the Lord.

This is possible, not because we could work harder at it – though we could. No, this is possible because God took the first step toward us. God was the first to act, and all we have to do is respond in faith and hope, with grace and mercy. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,” says Zachariah, “for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us ... that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”

If, based on that promise of God, which is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ, if we acted in faith and hope with grace and mercy, we'd have no enemies who hate us, we'd have nothing in life to fear.

And not only us, but people everywhere, everyone would have all the love they need. No one would suffer from a lack of food or clothing. Nations would cease their warring ways, and there would be a true and lasting peace.

The problem with this is we just don't know how to get along, apart from God. When we step out on our own, apart from God, we get lost. It's as if even Jesus is not enough to bring us around. And maybe he's not. Maybe it takes more than the birth of the baby Jesus for us to really get what God is doing in our midst. Maybe it takes someone other than Jesus, or at least someone acting alongside Jesus interacting with Jesus. At least one, and hopefully lots more people interacting with Jesus. Maybe that's what it takes for us to get along.

Before Jesus, there was another baby, you know? John the Baptizer, born of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Talking to his newborn son, Zachariah says, “You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

The birth of these two little babies reminds us that God rarely works alone, that God usually works through us. Apart from God we are nothing, but with God, anything is possible.

The promise of God working with us and through us is that (quote), "... The dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The way of peace starts with us acknowledging that God works through us, and not just us, but through other people also. It's OK for people to be different from us. In fact, as individuals and as people of different faiths, we rarely if ever get it right, thinking and acting in a vacuum. Rather it is when we work through our difference in faith and hope with grace and mercy that we see God working in and through each of us.

This is how we are to be guided to peace – as family members with different personalities, as friends and coworkers with different opinions and desires, as communities and nations with different needs and resources.

We come to know peace even amid our difference when we come to know Christ, not as some abstract concept, but as the Word of God living among us and even in us and through us.

If you have a difference of opinion with someone and it's just eating away at you, talk to that person; or better yet, listen. Listen to his or her perspective. Imagine how he or she feels. Why would they be acting that way? And then ask yourself, how would Jesus respond? How would Jesus interact with that person.

I mean, we have the 10 Commandments and we have the teachings of Jesus, but better still, we have the interaction of Jesus – of God – with us. Let's use that divine interaction – God with us – in our own interactions – us with others.

At the advent of Jesus' birth, Zachariah says of God, "He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant...." When the ancient Israelites were lost in the wilderness, God promised to show us the way and to be with us always, and in Jesus he is. The holy covenant of God, says Zachariah, grants "us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness."

Can you imagine serving God without fear, in holiness and righteousness? Can you imagine if everyone approached life in service to God, without fear, in holiness and righteousness? Well, that's just what we are asked to imagine this Christmas. And not only imagine it, but live into it.

To live in a world like this, a world of true peace, we have to live into the covenant – the agreement – that God established with us as God's people. God breathed life into that covenant through the coming of Jesus Christ. And through the coming of Jesus, God breathes life into us, new life, new ways of interacting with each other, and responding to the world around us.

God so loved the world, that God sent his only son, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. How do things look in your world? Or in this world right now; in your interactions with the people in your life?

Can you imagine taking an action this week, this day, this very moment that is truly in keeping with God's promise of a lasting and universal peace, a peace embodied by Jesus.

Can you? Imagine it? Something? Something that you could do? Something that you could do to bring a little more Jesus into your life, a little more Jesus into the lives of those around you?

As Christmas draws near this week, let's all look for ways to be more Christlike toward those in our lives and throughout the world, and then notice the wonder and joy of God's spirit giving birth, even and especially in those troubling places in our lives, and in our world. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

God of glory, we eagerly await the coming of our Savior. It continues to amaze us that the birth of this baby would change the world.

Help us live as people of grace – people who are changed because we have encountered the living God.

In a time when the world wants to segregate and divide people by political party, gender, race or religion, help us see beyond those labels, to see all people as your children.

Help us find common ground where we are able, following Jesus' teaching and example. Let us realize our own ability to bring about change.

We strive to be people who live in the light, not weighed down by darkness or fear or uncertainty, but sometimes that's difficult.

Help us remember that your abiding love and mercy sustain us in times of fear.

Our culture expects this to be a season of good cheer, but for some of us, O Lord, the needs and the fears can be overwhelming.

Many of us sit in fear of the unknown – worrying about what will happen tomorrow.

And yet, we celebrate in the hope of the One who was born in a lowly stable and who will come again. We remember that he is Emmanuel, God with us. Always.

That is what gives us confidence to unburden all of our fears, concerns and joys with the One who created and sustains us, the One who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we  
forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.  
Amen.**