

“In the beginning was the word.” That, of course is the opening of the prologue to the Gospel of John. “And the word was made flesh.” This is the season we revisit again not only the meaning this “incarnation” but also when we seek to open ourselves to the experience of God being born in us.

So today’s gospel lesson is a bit curious. It’s that part of the first chapter of John that surrounds the familiar words of the prologue. It’s a kind of very ordinary contrast that parallels those exalted words about the *logos* coming into the world (the world that was made by it) in order to enlighten every one in that world and give those who receive him, who believe in him, the power and the right to become God’s own offspring.

It’s really quite a radical notion, when you take it in: it means that in the same way that Jesus is “eternally begotten” of God, and is God, so can we be born of God, become perfect reflections of God, as well. Now we good church-going folk tend to steer away from, we tend to be scandalized by, such talk. We’re content to be able to hope to go to heaven, to live a relatively good life and to be met with God’s mercy at our end. But the idea that we are actually called to journey into God, to become like Jesus, to be in this life divinized, so to speak, seems an affront to our humility.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church it’s quite well attested, this idea of human beings becoming God, as the doctrine of *theosis* or deification. And even in the collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas we find this doctrine boldly stated. Listen: “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ . . .” So, God became a human being so that human beings could become God!

We in the West, I dare say, are too **proud** of our humility to pay more than occasional lip service to such an outrageous claim. I think we prefer low performance expectations. Come periodically, give a bit—but generally nowhere near even the minimal standard of 10% of our income, that is a *tithe*, pray hardly at all—unless we find ourselves or someone near us in terrible distress: we could be largely described as “**bearish**” about religion and spirituality. But we are certainly not unusual in this. Even John the Baptist, as much of a wild-man prophet as he was, was cautious about getting too close to God, or about *what* God he was getting close to.

When John is asked persistently by the authorities who he is and why he is baptizing, he claims only to be “the voice—crying in the wilderness, ‘**prepare**’ the way of the Lord.” In Matthew and Luke’s story, he seems to have lost confidence in his own judgment and taken offense at Jesus who is not behaving like he thinks a Messiah should behave. No doubt what he expects is more like the way he self-righteously rails at those he calls a “brood of vipers” who come to be baptized only in order to hedge their bets, instead of doing the economic justice that God demands. He seems to expect that in the Messiah, God will come with vengeance and punishment to shut down commerce in sin and send the profligate speculators to prison.

John's story is a tragedy, a narrative of eternal justice, where God and the forces of light meet the forces of darkness on their own terms but with superior force. This is usually the way we think about religion or the way religion is portrayed to us in our own culture. It seems locked in the zero sum terms of our closed world system, rivalrous, mean-spirited, vindictive, obsessed with judgment. No wonder such a god, or such an image of god, is repugnant and repulsive, except to people who seem to need to believe in a god who promises to punish their own personal enemies. No wonder such an idea of god is widely ridiculed, a straw god set up so that it can easily be knocked down by those whose self-righteous atheism has become merely another form of the religion they claim to despise.

But the story that Jesus tells, embodies, and lives out is not closed to the endless possibility of growth, of change, even of surprise and new insight. The clues to this God are all over the other passages we read today. Jesus himself takes on the passage from Isaiah and applies it to himself at his inaugural sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth: "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He claims to be the one anointed to "bring good news to the oppressed, and bind up the brokenhearted, . . . to give those who mourn a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness . . . instead of a faint spirit."

He is "**bullish**" about the future, and appropriating the universal symbol for comedy, the passage ends with a wedding, "I will greatly rejoice . . . for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, . . . as a bridegroom decks himself with garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels," and the restorative return to a garden, like Eden, "for as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." Writing from the fear and depression of their captivity in Babylon these prisoners of hope, in the name of the prophet Isaiah, provide Jesus an image for his entire ministry which brings the divinely established future into the present moment.

We may be skeptical. We may think of this as wishful thinking, but even steel-eyed economists will admit that much of future is determined by our attitude, by how we approach its possibilities, trust one another, and risk its rewards. So now is the time for us to rejoice and give thanks. Listen to Paul's outlandish exhortation to the poor and destitute in Thessalonica: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Especially at a time like this we need to resist the temptation to draw back, to grasp at what we think is ours in fear. We need to renew our confidence in the future of God, the story the Jesus is unfolding in each of our lives. He is drawing us to himself, enabling us to more and more fully manifest the expression of God in our own life and in our own relationships, so that whoever we are, we may become more like God, more filled with his grace and love. And as that love becomes more perfected in us, the fear that so assaults us in these times will be put to flight. And we will become Christ to one another.