

John 1:1-5  
*Now in Flesh Appearing*  
December 25, 2022 ~ Nativity of the Lord/Christmas Day  
Christmas Message  
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The place was Fayetteville, Arkansas. The year was 1949. In a church basement, decorated with balloons and streamers, over 75 church members were huddled together, excited to begin a surprise baby shower for their pastor's wife who was expecting their first baby, due the next month. The people were my mom and dad, married in 1946, booming with the best of them: this was to be their first of four babies, my oldest sister, Wendy.

My dad had been in on planning the surprise shower from the beginning, his main job to was to lure her to the church at the right moment, on some made up premise. So in she walks, they all yell, "Surprise"! The lights go on, her mouth opens wide with surprise and delight, and some embarrassment. Back then, folks were more discrete about "being in the family way" than we are these days. So just standing in front of all these parishioners eight months pregnant was embarrassing enough. But then after the shouts of surprise died down, came the inevitable pause, into which my smooth talking, unflappable-always-ready-with-an-appropriate-word Dad says in his loud preacher voice, "I suppose you're all wondering how all this got started."

After a slight hesitation, one person began to giggle and then another, and then the whole room filled with gales of laughter. My mom turned as red as these poinsettias, feeling suddenly like she was standing there naked in front of all these people. And there was my dad, Rev. Ed, with really nothing he could say to smooth this one over. Yes, this is one of our family stories, told from generation to generation.

Of course, we have a pretty good idea of how a human family gets started, but today's the day, Christmas morning, to consider the more cosmic birth question, the one that John doesn't hesitate to describe, the mystery of the cosmic Christ. The Word, around since the beginning "before the stars, before the day, before the rivers were carved out of clay." became the walking, talking, eating, sleeping, localized, historical Jesus of Nazareth. As it is written in John 1:14a "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." What does this really mean for us, today on December 25, 2022?

Here's a way for us to grab hold of this big one, a foothold that can give us a way to scale this rather sheer theological cliff. Has anyone ever done technical mountain climbing, you know, with ropes and pitons? Have any of you ever climbed, or attempted to climb one of those climbing walls? Then you know exactly what I'm talking about: once you find a good foothold, you're set up for the next level of the climb. It doesn't have to be very big. It just needs to be in the right place, with enough there to put your weight on, as your hands seek the next ledge. Footholds give you the way up what would be an otherwise impossible ascent.

Our foothold this morning, for this cliff hanger of a question: is the word, "flesh." In the baby named, Jesus, God become flesh. It's both metaphor and fact all at once. In Jesus, God got skin. Skin is something we all know about. It's the largest organ of our body. Whether it's baby fresh, teen pimply, or saggy, old wrinkly, it's pretty amazing stuff. As Rita Golden Gelman, writes in her child's book, *Body Battles*: "Your body is completely wrapped in skin. Skin is tough. You can pull it and scrub it. Bend it and wrinkle it. Sit on it. Float it. And sink it. It's a super-sensational, what a creational, squashable, washable, skin." It's amazing how tough skin really is. Yet at the same time, it is vulnerable, it bleeds and burns, and that's where the metaphor can kick in for us. But more specifically, I want to dial our microscope down to the amazing way skin constantly dies and regenerates. That what keeps it healthy and going even for over 100 years.

Along with the daily dying we know that anything with skin will sooner or later die all together. Skin dies after we stop breathing. When God got skin, the day Jesus was born, it also meant God would die. God would even do the not-God thing of dying. We know how Jesus died. That is one of the few facts about Jesus' life on earth which is undisputed. Jesus was killed on a cross as a young adult. However, even if he had not been crucified, he would have died one way or another. What kind of a God would choose to do something as painful, as temporal and self-limiting as that? Our God who created us. Our God who got it all started. God demonstrated this truth to us by being born, by getting skin. Talk about putting skin in the game.

So, the question of the day isn't how this all got started, or how did Jesus really get born, that was God's mysterious work on our behalf. No, that's not it. The question of the day for us is this: *When are we going to start trusting the One Who got it all started?* No matter how steep or sheer the cliff we are climbing. I mean the deep fears. The ones that are hard to talk about. The ones that keep us up at night, or keep us stuck in old, deadening routines and ways of thinking? God is ready to work with our mistakes and our dead ends. No matter how many times we keep making them. That is how God brings out the best in us. That is, perhaps, how God becomes most real to us.

Let 2023 be the year we start trusting God with our deepest fears. Beware: when we go down this path, we set ourselves up for real change, rather than just a minor rearrangement of our lives. Richard Rohr, in his book, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* wrote "even Napoleon was supposed to have said, 'Only people of the Spirit actually change things, the rest of us just rearrange them'"<sup>1</sup> You know, things like dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. How resistant are you and I, how resistant are we as a church to trusting God with our fears about the future, with the fears of our inadequacies? I wonder what has to happen for us to trust God with all our stuff, great and small.

Perhaps you've heard the true story of Jim MacLaren and his battle with this very question. *Jim MacLaren doesn't have any memory of the first accident. He can't tell you what it feels like to be hit by a New York City bus and thrown eighty-nine feet in the air, to have your bones shattered and your legs crushed, to have your organs pulverized and to be pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital, because he can't recall any part of it.*

*The last thing he remembers about that accident is happily cruising down Fifth Avenue on his motorcycle, on "one of those balmy October nights when anything seems possible. Jim MacLaren was, as of that moment, a handsome, intelligent, ambitious, and well-liked twenty-two-year-old who had the world on a string. He'd recently graduated from Yale, where he'd excelled as a scholar, a football player, and a theater star—not a bad trifecta for a fatherless kid from a moneyless family... He never saw the 40,000 pound bus that ran the red light on Thirty-fourth Street and demolished him. Nor does he have any memory of the paramedics who scraped him off the sidewalk (certain he was already a corpse) and delivered him to Bellevue Hospital. The next thing Jim remembers—after disappearing into a coma for eight days—is waking up in intensive care and learning that his left leg had been amputated below the knee.*

*That was his first accident. Over the next eight years, Jim MacLaren made a concerted effort to become the best one-legged man he possibly could... Jim now became a more accomplished athlete as an amputee than he'd ever been as an able-bodied man... Jim kept pushing that temporary body of his to higher limits... Soon he could run a marathon in just over three hours. And then he took up triathlons. Yes, triathlons. Once he'd survived a few of those he set out to conquer the Ironman: Two and a half miles of swimming, 112 miles of biking, and a full 26.2 mile marathon, all in one race, all in one day. And all on one leg...*

*Which explains what Jim was doing in southern California on one cool June afternoon. He was participating in an Ironman. He was speeding through the town of Mission Viejo on his bicycle, at thirty-five miles per hour. Suddenly Jim heard the crowd gasp. He turned to see what was going on and he realized he was about to be hit by a car.... This time Jim vividly remembers being hit. What he remembers most clearly is this image: all the nurses were in tears, "We're so sorry." Jim MacLaren was now a quadriplegic. He was thirty years old. And this is where his story begins... Over the next months, Jim became—to nobody's surprise—the model recovering quadriplegic... "Doesn't Jimmy look great? Everyone said. "Isn't Jimmy doing incredibly well?" In fact, though, he wasn't. He wasn't doing well at all...*

*There eventually comes a wall where healing stops and the truth of what you're left with settles in. And Jim had just hit that wall. His body had healed as much as it was ever going to. And all the determination in the world could not change these facts: he would never be out of pain again, he would never lift his arms above his head again; he would never be able to control his bladder again. And he would absolutely never walk again. Not even if he spent ten hours a day in physical therapy, as his old triathlete buddies kept suggesting he do... The day he realized that it couldn't be beat, was the day the invincible Jim MacLaren finally began to lose it.*

*His life took a dark turn and quickly he became addicted to cocaine and alcohol. One dark night, deep into his addictions, he shouted at God: "I am here right now and I am talking to you. Answer me!" Jim had believed that was his low point, but now he saw another possible truth: perhaps he had been closer than ever to the divine. Perhaps that had been his highest moment... For the first time, he could see something most people go through their entire lives blind to—namely that we are not in charge of what happens to us in this lifetime. We are in charge only of how we perceive what happens to us in this lifetime... Safety, entitlement, power—these are all*

*fantasies. We don't drive our destinies. Not in that way. Jim realized, to his relief, that once you stop trying to control events you can't control anyway, you can drop all that wasted energy and focus on the one thing you are in charge of.* <sup>ii</sup>

The "one thing we are in charge of" is whom or what we choose to trust. It's a choice we make every day, every hour. When are we going to start trusting God with our deepest fears? What are we waiting for? The season of waiting is over. As Leonard Bernstein wrote in his 1971 Theater Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers, titled MASS, "*O you people of power, your hour is now. You may plan to rule forever, but you never do somehow! So we wait in silent treason until reason is restored, and we wait for the season of the Word of the Lord. We await the season of the Word of the Lord.*" <sup>iii</sup>

What are we waiting for? God has given you all the power you will ever need: The power to become children of God. Powered by God's fullness of grace upon grace. Not tomorrow, not when we "get our act together," not when we have a certain amount of money in the bank, a certain level of physical or mental health, or achieved an ideal work/home balance. Nor when we have all our questions answered, As they say in AA, "That's stinkin' thinkin'." Jesus is saying, how about now. I'm here waiting.

2022 has been another long year. Tough times all around. I'm sure many of us are more than ready to close the books this year, and start fresh in 2023. Will this be the year we let God work with us through our mistakes and broken lives? That's when the Word becomes flesh, appears! That's how the "super sensational what a creation!" People of the Spirit actually change things, instead of just rearranging them. We don't have to wait for the mass production of electric cars, to begin letting our bodies and our church body run on the *alternative fuel of God's "grace upon grace."* Do we have to be hit by a New York City bus and a car in Hawaii for God to get through to us? I hope not.

Let's finish this message together by singing/praying acapella the 4<sup>th</sup> stanza of hymn #133, "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

*Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to thee be all glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!  
O Come Let us Adore him, O come, let us adore him;  
O Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, (Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, OH, 2008), p.88.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://bolstablog.wordpress.com/2010/09/01/farewell-jim/>, also: <https://www.paulkix.com/post/every-great-story-ends-where-it-begins>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201908/what-leonard-bernsteins-mass-tells-us-about-our-church/>