

**Sermon: The Word Dwells Among Us**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **John 1:14; Matthew 2:13-23**

Two weeks ago, we spoke about the birth of Jesus. Today, we'll talk a little about what it means to say we celebrate Christmas.

Nearly 100 years ago, from 1926 to 1933, a theologian named Karl Barth wrote a series of Christmas meditations for several German newspapers.<sup>1</sup> During this time, Germany went from relative peace and prosperity following the war to depression, unemployment, and the threat of civil war to Nazi dictatorship.

From year to year, you can sense how his topics reflect these social changes, but he never falls into despair. Christmas is always hopeful, regardless of what's happening outside.

In the 1926 article, Barth broke down our first reading from John. His goal, he wrote, was to assist readers with a brief exposition of what has become the central message of Christmas. From there, he said, 'everybody can go on thinking it through for [themselves].'<sup>2</sup>

So: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

This was an act of God and God's self-revelation to people. The Word that became flesh is "true God and true man."<sup>3</sup> More than that, this is a Word which was thought and spoken in the eternal beginning of all things, in God's presence, by God, with all of God's attributes and nature – God's Word by which all things came into being.

The boy who grew up to be Jesus Christ, the man of whom John's Gospel speaks, is the Word of God himself. The light that shines in the darkness is an ordinary man who gives light to ordinary people.<sup>4</sup> And the Word of God comes to us where we are, not where we should perhaps like to be, but among us, whether we be emperor or beggar.

He became flesh, meaning he *came to be* flesh in the form of a baby boy born to Mary and Joseph. Without ceasing to be eternal God, the Word was there in the manger.

Finally, he does not appear to us in the form of an angel or as an ideal man but, as the apostle Paul wrote, 'in the form of a servant' (Philippians 2:7).

Speaking of angels, they and dreams often communicate God's plan in Matthew's Gospel. When the angels speak, they often begin by saying, "do not be afraid." That phrase or something close to it occurs in the Bible roughly 365 times.

Our daughter pointed out that they probably say that because Biblical angels can be scary! And she's right: the Seraphim described in Isaiah 6 each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

And they were very big.

Ezekiel 1 includes a detailed and very elaborate description of cherubs, who were of human form *except* each had four different kinds of faces, and each of them had four wings.

The angels in the Gospels seem to have learned to dial back the intensity.

And today, they are not so fearsome at all.

But in Matthew's Gospel, there was plenty to be afraid of. According to him, it looks as if it took up to two years for the magi to arrive in Jerusalem. Their story terrified Herod, and for good reason. No one saw him as a legitimate ruler and his hold on power was tenuous at best. He knew the Roman emperor could replace him at any time, but he also worried about the people turning against him, which they might, since he was cruel and not even Jewish. So, hearing about a new king born in Bethlehem was not good news for Herod the Great.

His response was murderous.

God protected the family every step of the way, through angels sent to Joseph in dreams. The Word came to be flesh and dwelt among us, but at a high price.

Barth picked up on all of this in his 1929 Christmas article, at the beginning of the Great Depression in Europe.

When an angel of the LORD says, 'be not afraid,' he wrote, would that make sense? The shepherds at Bethlehem, according to Luke, were filled with fear. For them, an angelic command to 'be not afraid' had meaning.

But, Barth asked, where is the fear among us who celebrate Christmas today? What does 'fear' mean to us in our cozy corner of the world? Who thinks of fear when all the lights on the Christmas tree work, or when there's a fresh supply of egg nog in the fridge, or when we know that all our friends and family are safe and sound?

In 1929, Barth watched as the German economy crumbled as did all economies around the world. More dire for him, though, was that, for Christian Europe as a whole, ‘the Red peril from the East’ threatened the soul of the nation and thus, he wrote, ‘we all fear.’<sup>5</sup>

In that environment, Barth saw, one person is afraid because he does not know on whom he can depend. Another is afraid because he cannot trust himself.

In any age, in one way or another, we all fear something.

Our Christmas celebrations today have nothing to do with fear, and all our festivities, whatever they happen to be, do not change our real, personal, fears.

Thousands of Ukrainian families are celebrating the holidays after losing friends or relatives to war. According to Western estimates, about 100,000 Ukrainian service personnel have died or been injured in the conflict. Thousands of civilians have also died, plus an estimated 100,000 Russian soldiers dead or wounded.

Orthodox Ukrainians traditionally celebrate Christmas on January 7, as they do in Russia, but many have begun switching to December 25 as part of a broader move to side with the West.

“We’ll celebrate our holidays as always,” President Zelensky said. “We’ll laugh and enjoy ourselves as always. With only one difference: We won’t wait for a miracle, since we’re creating it ourselves. Freedom has a high price,” he said, “but slavery’s price is even higher.”<sup>6</sup>

The shepherds in Bethlehem were not afraid of the dark; they were afraid because an angel of the LORD spoke to them, and the glory of the LORD shone all around them. ‘Be not afraid’ is the angel’s – God’s – answer to our greatest fears.

The same angel brought news of great joy too, so that nothing may make us afraid.

Hope rests on faith, and faith rests on the fact that the Word dwelt among all of us<sup>7</sup> – even among those without faith, the Herods, Pontius Pilates, and emperors included.

Through the Word, God, with boundless grace, entered the world to associate with the lowly, the hopeless, the helpless, and the sinners. That’s good news for a lot of people, but not for the Herods, Pilates, and emperors, and that’s why they have always responded with fear.

What they have never understood and will never understand is that the Word dwells among us, before that night in Bethlehem and after it too, in the hearts and minds and actions of all those who bring God’s kingdom to the world. God has spoken, and God still speaks.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, K. (1959). *Christmas*. Oliver and Boyd Ltd., London.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29 ff.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/zelensky-urges-ukrainians-to-persevere-as-putin-says-moscow-ready-for-long-war-11671970240>, accessed 30 December 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.