

Communion at Christmas

A Sermon Expositing John 1:1-18

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It's weird, right? Communion at Christmas.

Now, before any of you sound the silent alarms that go directly to the heresy police, let me offer my defense up front. Of all the images, rites, and symbols in Christianity, table imagery speaks to me personally more so than all the rest. Each have their place, their message, their mystery, and their purpose in the life of faith, but the notion of all people coming together around a table of fellowship set in the illuminating shadow of self-sacrificial love is the absolute epicenter of my personal theology. I love communion, or The Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, or whatever you're accustomed to calling it. But it's weird, right? At Christmas time?

The driving image of what we do at this table, indeed, what we will do in just few moments is the last meal the disciples share with Jesus before he is handed over, by one of them, to Roman authorities and violently executed as a political dissident. That imagery is just a long, long way from the imagery of a still, quiet, silent night in Bethlehem gathered around the make-shift crib of the infant Prince of Peace isn't it? I hope you won't find it flippant of me to say, but the sense of communion at Christmas time to me is, "Welcome to the world, dear child, now look what's coming for you?" It isn't that Communion isn't beautiful and important, it's just that sometimes I wonder why we don't just take a beat. Let's let the child grow up liturgically. Let's at least get beyond his baptism in our weekly readings before we settle into the gritty realities ahead. So why do we celebrate communion even through Christmas?

I'm glad you asked.

The purely logistical answer to that question is simply that in our local tradition at First Baptist we celebrate Communion once each month and on other liturgically significant days. We want to keep the imagery of what happens at this table fresh and in front of us throughout the year, so we don't take long breaks from visiting the table. Other traditions with more sacramental views of Communion might do it every week or even throughout each week so communicants have regular opportunity. "Regularity," we might say, "is why we celebrate communion through every season, even Christmas."

But there is something in John's telling of the Christmas story, which Chelsea just read for us, that gives us more than a logistical reason. It elevates the celebration of Communion at such a time as this as of a particular character, a particular theme that might be less noticed at other times of Christian celebration. John's Christmas story works differently than does Matthew's or Luke's. Instead of starting with "live action," as it were, with Mary and Joseph and the angels *or* with a long genealogy that shows Jesus's connection to the line of David, it begins cosmic. If you've ever seen a film, the first scene of which begins with a shot of the stars in the sky before the camera gradually tilts down to show what is happening on earth, John is doing the same thing with his first chapter. "In the beginning was the Word," he says. "The Word," is for John, the animating force behind all that is; the cosmic power that created and sustains all the cosmos. All of that power, all of that energy, all of that creativity, he says, "...became flesh and lived among us." God walked among us, says John,

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

as one of us - the mystery of the incarnation, the in-flesh-ing of God. But just before the tilt down from the heavens falls upon the person of John the Baptist, John the gospel writer (I know, Johns in the New Testament are like Kens at First Baptist...there are lot of them and getting them mixed up might be a little embarrassing for you, but they're all worth listening to) John the gospel writer reiterates the whole incarnation reality, but from one particular dimension thereof. Sometimes statements of the obvious are no less profound. "No one has ever seen God," John says.

One of our bright, young worshipers here at FBCR connected with one of the foundational questions the incarnation seeks to answer last week. After we went on a search for the physical baby Jesus during our Jammies and Jingles service, and discovered through the chaos that Jesus is actually all around us and among us and with us this young worshiper said nevertheless, "but we didn't find the baby Jesus!" It is one of the primal challenges of faith that even though we proclaim a God who is *with us*, no one has ever seen God. Seen the signs of God's presence? Sure. Seen things we're certain are God-like? Yes! But seen God in full display? None of us have.

For John, the person of Jesus scratched that theological itch. In the person of Jesus, the animating force behind the universe got a name. Got a body. People became friends with the creator of the cosmos; people dined with the creator of the cosmos. And in the life that was lived and now testified about in scripture we finally got to *SEE God!* And in the pen of the evangelists we see that God is not just powerful. God is loving. God is just. God plays favorites with the poor, the dispossessed, the vulnerable, and the mistreated. God has opinions! God loves a good party. And in the end, the creator of all that is, cosmic power of the universe, chose the way of suffering. God died. God was betrayed and crucified. Through the eyes of scripture we saw God and God's love led God to suffering, led God to a table with God's disciples where God explained and demonstrated for them what all of that meant. It is the very same table we gather 'round today.

You see, Communion isn't perfect at all, but it gives us some-thing. Just like our bright, young worshiper pointed out – even though we know God is with us, sometimes we just need a God we can interact with *in the flesh*. A piece of individually wrapped bread isn't God in any literal sense, but in a group of people bound by love for one another and love for the world around them coming together every month plus liturgically appropriate days to remember and therefore live into a love that serves others first – we SEE God.

So yes, Communion *is* a symbol of the incarnation, but I'll see you and raise you one more. Communion is a way of *seeing* God in the flesh that also invites us to bring that very flesh into ourselves. To bring that very carnality into oneself is to not only experience incarnation, but to become one with it. Not to become divine in ourselves – lest we perk the ears of the heresy police – but to recognize that the animating reality of the incarnation – Creator God - is not only with us, but within us.

And why does it matter that we know this creative, powerful, self-giving love is within us?
Because without you, so many of us can't see God.