



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Flesh

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 25, 2020*

*Christmas Day*

*Based on Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14*

*Word made Flesh, you sanctify our bodies with your presence. Teach us to treat all human bodies with care and respect. Amen.*

If I were to ask you to summarize the meaning of Christmas in one sentence, what would you say? Would you talk about “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” and “Santa Claus Coming to Town?” Would you invoke shepherds and angels, Mary and Joseph, Wise Men and a star? Or would you keep it simple, sticking to the main themes, like peace, joy, hope, love, and a light shining through the darkness on a cold December night?

Even if you managed to mention the little baby Jesus, my guess is that he wouldn't capture much of your attention. Sure, he's the reason for all of this fuss, nominally. But you'd probably be fine with him sleeping through his birthday festivities. He is a baby, after all. For centuries, Christmas revelers have relegated Jesus to the margins as they have droned on about the holly and the ivy, wassailing bowls, figgy pudding, and three French hens. In more recent years, as a Christian Christmas has given way to a secular holiday season, wintry imagery has shared the stage with beautiful abstractions that simultaneously signify everything and nothing at all. Christmas has become a vehicle for warm, fuzzy, inchoate feelings. Each year we escape into a set of reassuring fairytales whose lines we all know by heart, happy to be whisked away from our fears and concerns for a few brief but soothing moments, confident that we will be neither challenged nor changed by our annual ritualized remembrance.

Yet, by coming among us as a human being, God's aim was not to provide us with a temporary distraction from the pains and troubles of the present moment. To the contrary, God entered into our chaos to suffer alongside us and show solidarity with us. God sought to join in our trials, not to help us flee them.

The Word, John's Gospel declares, became flesh. The Word did not remain a far-away force in an ethereal paradise above nor did the Word continue as a lifeless philosophical abstraction on an obscure page of an ancient tome. The Word became concrete, alive, real. The Word took on a physical body, one that could do everything we can: breathe and sleep, struggle and grow, hurt and cry. The Word walked our streets, ate at our tables, and spat into our eyes.

Deciding to come among us in this way was a bold and risky move. It made the Creator of everything, a figure accustomed to unparalleled power and control, vulnerable to the chances of fate and to the fragility of mortal life. Through the Incarnation, God chose to embrace the limitations and imperfections of human flesh, to see the promise rather than the problem in having a body.

In making this leap, God doubled down on what our Prayer Book calls “the dignity of every human being,” a dignity first demonstrated in the story of Creation, in which God made human beings in the divine

image. By becoming like us, by taking on our physical form, God showed us just how holy the human body is: holy enough to be worthy of the fullness of God's presence.

It has not always been easy, however, for the Christian tradition to recognize the sacredness of the human body. Since practically the beginning, we have set the Flesh against the Spirit, making the assumption that bodily desires are by definition bad. Our long legacy of suspicion towards sexuality has left untold damage in its wake. We have valued some bodies over others, excluding women and people of color from leadership, condoning discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and abuse. Though one of the central events in the Christian faith involves God hallowing the human body by being made flesh, the Church has consistently disparaged the body, treating it as trash rather than the sacred temple that it is.

But modern discomfort with the body is by no means limited to the Church. Think, for example, about the enormous pressure our society places on the appearance of bodies and the eating disorders that have emerged as a result. Think about the sexual objectification of bodies and the sexual assault and harassment that still continually occur. Think about exploited bodies that labor in unsafe conditions and are not properly compensated for their work. Think about the black bodies that have been gunned down at the hands of police. Think about the bodies at our borders that have been turned away or left in the desert to die. Think, too, about the ways in which we treat our own bodies: the rest we deny ourselves, the exercise we refuse to do, the substances we consume. How willing are we to treat all human bodies—those of others and those of ourselves—as holy, as deserving of our utmost respect?

And think, finally, about this COVID-19 pandemic we've all been enduring for the past nine months and some change—about the 310,000 people in the United States and the 1.7 million people worldwide who have died and the millions more who have in some way been affected, about the families who have had to mourn loved ones, about the healthcare systems that were unprepared and overwhelmed, about the frontline workers who have been putting themselves at tremendous risk, about the growing lines at food banks and the hungry folks who stand in them. Much of this pandemic was out of our control, but not all of it was. A little over two thousand years ago, the birth of Jesus revealed that nothing on earth was holier than human flesh—nothing more worthy of God's presence—and yet, in our collective failure to keep each other safe and healthy, we seem to keep saying that other things—our wealth, our freedom, our personal comfort—matter more.

Many of us are understandably mourning the lack of a normal Christmas this year. Without the ability to show up at church, to go to concerts and parties, to visit our extended family, it may seem as if Christmas isn't even happening at all. But make no mistake: Christmas is being celebrated this year—not just in church services and family gatherings over Zoom, not just in the Disney Holiday Singalong and the lighting of the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. Christmas is being celebrated by every nurse or doctor who is saving a life, by every scientific researcher or public health official who is working to improve our pandemic response, by every UPS or FedEx driver who is delivering a vaccine, by every volunteer at the food pantry or at the soup kitchen who is helping the hungry find something to eat, by every one of us when we wear our masks, when we practice social distancing, when we stay home. In Bethlehem of Judea while Quirinius was Governor of Syria, God chose to sanctify human flesh. We celebrate Christmas when we treat all human bodies with the reverence they deserve.

Amen.

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