

December 25, 2018 – Christmas Day  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 1:1-14

### **Good Is the Flesh**

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,  
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,  
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,  
good is the body for knowing the world,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

So goes stanza one of a poem by hymn writer Brian Wren. Wren is originally from England, he was born in 1936 and is still alive. You can find texts that he's written in hymnals of many Christian traditions, including several in the hymnal that we use here, though it does not contain this particular hymn, which was written just about when our hymnal was published.

*Good is the Flesh* is a poem about the Christmas story, about God come to us a baby, according to all that being an infant implies: "good is the birthing, the milk in the breast, good is the feeding, caressing and rest." And it is a poem about the Christmas story according to John's gospel, and all that implies: good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Unlike Luke's telling of the story of Christ, the story we hear on Christmas Eve, John's gospel, which we hear today, does not begin in a makeshift delivery room in Bethlehem; John's gospel begins before the Big Bang. John's gospel begins with what was there, before anything was anything there. There was one thing. What was there? God was there. In the beginning, God was there, so John goes, so Genesis goes, in the beginning God was there, and, John's gospel says, Jesus was there, Jesus, the Word. The Word that became flesh, God who is Jesus, God's self-expression into human comprehension.

This is the Christmas story, according to John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." God's coming to earth told by way of a poem. Even in its English translation you can hear the poetic cadence, and in the Greek language in which it was first written the words also rhyme. Biblical scholars think this poem might originally have been a hymn, one of the first Christmas hymns, "And the word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

In the incarnation, in becoming flesh and living among us, God makes a striking, assertive statement about bodies, about where they live and about how we should think of them. As stanza two of Wren's poem says:

Good is the body for knowing the world,  
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,  
feeling, perceiving, within and around,  
good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

If God became a body, God must see the good in them, the good they are for, the good world they inhabit. God became a body for the world God so loves, as John's gospel will say in chapter three, "for God so loved the world." These are basic claims of Christian faith. Thus, in

contrast to any ranting—ancient or modern—that says that bodies are bad, that physical selves are a source of embarrassment or shame, in contrast to any belief system—sacred or secular—that says the flesh must be mortified, or punished, or airbrushed, in stark contrast to that, Christian faith affirms that bodies are good. It's there from the beginning, in Genesis 1, and in John 1. At the very beginning, of creation, of the gospel, from the very beginning we hear God saying bodies are good: from their first breath and to their last.

Stanza three of Wren's poem:

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,  
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,  
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

During the Christmas season in some churches, to give visual expression to this, there's a manger (*put the manger by the cross*) and after the reading of the gospel they do this (*put the processional Bible in the manger*). The word became flesh and dwelt among us, as John's Christmas hymn says, or as it says in another Christmas hymn, which we just sang, God was "pleased, as man, with us to dwell." Or as the last stanza of Wren's hymn puts it.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,  
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,  
good is the body, for good and for God,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.