

In This Here Place, We Flesh

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[0 : 00] How are y'all this evening? I am thrilled to be here, and I will name as we start that I have a little something going on that has been tested as negative, but what a name that I may be drinking a little more than I normally would. If you would, mask, pray with me.

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. God incarnate Emmanuel, thank you for this gathering this evening. Thank you for the way that you are drawing us into trust, that you are the way maker, the miracle worker, and the promise keeper.

Lord, please help us to know how in this space to open up invulnerability that we might be shaped by you and shaped by our interactions and conversations with one another.

We are a people in need, and you are a great Savior. In Jesus' name, amen. So I want to first start by saying how incredibly honored I am to be here.

[1 : 32] I was hoping that Anthony would not lift up that it was my first Sunday, but I guess you might have known that anyway, so you know, it's all right. And I'm excited to be selected as the first, or not as the first, as a new associate pastor in this church.

In a lot of ways, I'll name that it feels a little bit unreal. I'm still very much wrapping my head around the joy of all of this.

Growing up in North Carolina in churches that, in many ways, I deeply loved and that shaped me, I had no real intuition that a black girl could become a pastor in the fullest sense of that word.

And definitely not, if I'm totally honest, a pastor in a community where white folks were present.

Totally honest. I saw women preach occasionally or sometimes lead in children's ministry, but they were consistently shut out from any kind of far-reaching decision-making or authority.

Maybe if your eyes were close enough to the exact right shade of blue, then you would be allowed just a little bit further up the ladder.

[2 : 57] But for us black girls, for us brown girls, for us who used a little bit too much street slang or who had too much of an accent, who were too aware that they were shaped by the theology that they imbibed around their mother's and auntie's kitchen tables.

Maybe more so than the theology they heard in the pulpit. The theology that they couldn't help, that we couldn't help but breathe in when we were eating ribs or holding chopsticks or making tortillas.

For us, acknowledged authority, especially in church, often felt like a pipe dream. So to say that I'm honored and surprised is an understatement.

This kind of decision, this kind of move by a church, unfortunately, it's too rare. It's all too rare. You could just name that honestly. And I'm also aware, even as I say all of that, that my fruitfulness here and our fruitfulness together might best be measured by how unsurprising moves and decisions like this become.

How normalized, how understood is simply being a reflection of God's kingdom of diversity and inclusion and hospitality. So, very simply, pray for me.

[4 : 31] Please pray for me. And pray for us. I would also say that, you know, I'm excited. I'm a little nervous. But I'm excited and glad that this is the first Sunday that I get to preach.

And that first Sunday falls in Advent. I didn't grow up in churches where people really observed the liturgical calendar, the way that Christians mark time.

I was probably in my 20s by the first time, you know, the first time I realized that, you know, Lent wasn't something that you pick off your clothes. Some of y'all know.

Mm-hmm. Yep. But in the years since that, I've developed a pretty strong attachment to these liturgical seasons. Ordinary time and Lent and Easter and Christmastide and the season we're in, Advent.

I, in particular, have a love for the scriptures that get lifted up during Advent because I think that they have become so sentimentalized, so saccharine, that there's a lot of meaning that's left uncovered.

[5 : 43] The stories from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that we read during Advent are both profoundly personal and shockingly political. And I know that Pastor Anthony, in moving through the Mark series, has talked some about this.

When I say political, I don't mean partisan. I mean that these stories are about relationships of power. They're about how we relate to power.

Personally, they ask us to cultivate the practice of enchantment in a world that is disenchanting. They are disenchanting. Like, I love, I'm so happy the Christmas tree's behind me.

I tried not to touch it when I came up. But, you know, I love it. They ask us to cultivate waiting with anticipation. They ask us to trust that light will come into the darkness.

They ask us to hope that hope will break in and overcome despair. But they also suggest, and this is where we start to talk about power, these Advent stories suggest that the world will be made right in peace.

[6 : 57] And they ask us to consider how that peace will come. Will it be through violent victory? Or will it be through nonviolent justice?

Marcus, and I should name this, Marcus Borg. And if you're interested in that idea, and John Dominic Crossan, write a lot about that. All right. So Matthew's story centers around King Herod, and it asserts basically that there is another king besides Jesus who holds power differently and invites us into an alternative kingdom.

Luke's story provides this beautiful counter to imperial theology, the imperial theology that Rome held by claiming that Caesar is not savior, nor is Caesar son of God, both of which were common titles for Caesar.

He is not the one who brings peace on earth. Jesus is. But again, through a program that is very different, through the program of empire, through a kingdom that is about community and justice and forgiveness and mutual aid.

These stories that we lift up during Advent are also relentless in pointing us back to the goodness of materiality, of the material world.

[8 : 27] Indeed, the central truth that Christians celebrate at Christmas, that Jesus took on flesh or became incarnate, informs the very good, affirms the very good of God's creation.

Maybe you remember last week that Heidi talked some about that. In a season that is full of rampant materialism, we have to become more connected to God's choice to show up in and through the material world.

Our embrace of materiality, of carnality, of our bodies and flesh as part of the world being made right. Our embrace of embodiment is also a form of resistance to things as they are.

To the kinds of kingdoms that the Herods and the Caesars of the world build in favor of the kingdom that Jesus invites us to. Now, it's at this point that I should name that most of this for me does not feel particularly abstract.

In his 2015 essay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, you like Ta-Nehisi Coates, can I get a yell, can I get a something? Okay. In his essay, Letter to My Son, this is what Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote.

[9 : 51] Here is what I would like for you to know. In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body. It is heritage.

I recognize that I live in a country in which bodies that look like mine are uniquely denigrated. That I live in a land whose soil has grown sour with the blood of people whose bodies look like mine. So much around me suggests that black bodies and brown bodies are not worthy of love, are not worthy of dignity, are and should be full of shame, are something to fear.

And because of that, so many of us have had to be intentional about loving our bodies, about connecting with them and seeing them as very good.

Now, you've probably noticed that last week we left the series we were doing on Mark. The preaching team had been doing on Mark.

[11 : 07] And we paused that series in order to start a new series started last week by Heidi called We Hear, In This Place We Hear Flesh. And that line comes out of a novel.

Anybody, I was a former English teacher. I repent. All right. So hopefully some people love literature in here. But that novel, Beloved, in which that line comes from, it's really about the way in which the

history of American enslavement haunts us.

Toni Morrison chooses the genre of ghost story to talk about this reality. And in my favorite scene of the movie, the holy woman, baby Suggs, she gets up and draws enslaved people into a clearing in the woods, away from the plantation gaze, where they can recapture their dignity and the love that they are denied outside of that clearing for their bodies.

She invites them to laugh and to laugh and to cry in ways that they could not in their everyday lives. And here's what she says.

Here, in this here place. Here, in this here place, we flesh. Flesh that weeps and laughs.

[12 : 28] Flesh that dances on bare grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder, they do not love your flesh. They despise it.

They don't love your eyes. They just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder, they flay it. And oh, my people, they do not love your hands.

Those they use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands. Love them, raise them up and kiss them.

Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face. Because they don't love that either. You got to love it. You.

You. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance. Backs that need support.

[13 : 25] Shoulders that need arms. Strong arms, I'm telling you. And oh, my people out yonder, hear me. They do not love your neck, unnoosed and straight.

So love your neck. Put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air.

More than your life holding womb and your life giving private parts. Hear me now. Love your heart. For this is the prize. For this is the prize. So this is one of my favorite scenes in the book.

Not only because it's about black spiritual expression in the midst of enslavement. But also because it's so affirming of the black body. Yet I think that basic passage carries a message for all of us.

It's a message that all of us need to hear. Again, we need to understand the material world and our bodies are part of making the world right. Loving them is part of making the world right.

[14 : 31] And we have to understand that that kind of love is a form of resistance to things as they are. And a movement into things as they should be.

And I want to name that I think what we're resisting is complex. Heidi mentioned last week the idea that in early Christianity, a lot of the church fathers in particular embraced Greek philosophy.

And particularly Greek philosophy's insistence of dualism. I'm going to show you that in a second. I'm going to quote another of my favorite scholars, Kelly Brown Douglas, to sum that up.

I'm not a philosopher, so she can sum that up. Christianity gradually became influenced by those aspects of Greek thought that denigrated the body and fostered a profound split between the body and the spirit.

This spiritualistic dualism was primarily crafted by Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. According to Platonism, the real world of value and beauty was that which could be perceived only by the soul.

[15 : 47] The world was conceived as timeless, changeless, and immaterial. The body and the senses could not grasp such a world.

Also greatly influencing early Christian thought was Stoic philosophy. The fundamental axiom of Stoic philosophy was to live according to nature.

And nature was identified with the divine order, which in turn was identified with reason, with logic, with the mind. So Greek philosophy introduces these entrenched binaries.

And here's just a little chart to kind of get at what some of those binaries are. Really basic, right? Spirit versus matter. Soul versus body.

And very importantly, reason and emotion. Reason versus emotion and passion and experience. And the problem really was that those categories, and still to this day, these categories, they're not neutral.

[16 : 52] One part of the binary is always considered greater than the other, such that whatever's in the lower part of the binary ends up needing to be managed or controlled or enslaved.

Here's Dr. Lynn Tonstaff. Here's what she says. Many cultural theorists believe binaries to be at the heart of many of the hierarchies that organize and stratify social and cultural life.

Typically, one term in a binary is valued more highly than the other term, and the more highly valued terms are associated with each other. So male is associated with culture, with reason, with light, and so on.

And female is associated with nature, falseness, darkness, and so on. Thanks to Greek philosophy's influence on Christianity, the body was devalued in favor of the soul and in favor of the mind.

And again, whatever's devalued has to be controlled, right? Your mind must control your body. So many of us were taught that.

[18:01] We could go on and on. But I want to say that not only are we resisting when we talk about what it means that Christ is incarnate, we're not only resisting this kind of Greek philosophy that came into Christianity, we're also portraying or also resisting the kind of body that Greek art often portrayed.

I'm not an art historian. If you're an art historian, forgive me, okay? And I'm leaning into the thinking of Scott McDougall. The classical body that you see portrayed in Greek art, smooth, has no holes, usually young and strong and well-muscled.

It's invulnerable and closed and self-contained and autonomous. And we have largely brought into the vision of that body.

And then in contrast to that kind of body, you had the grotesque body, which was not self-contained, which bled and mucus came out of it.

It had gaps in places and it was broken and it was hairy. But it was also capable of intimacy. I think that far too many of us cannot touch the beauty of the incarnation, the mystery of the incarnation and our own embodiment, because we feel far from that classical body.

[19:31] Our own bodies don't meet that standard. And then I just want to say that when we say in this here place we flesh, we're also resisting the logic of empire, which is grounded in assumptions about the hierarchy of bodies.

It ranks bodies. Now I'm going to pull this quote from, this is like, it's hard to explain this, but essentially Gomez de Zorara was, he was a 15th century chronicler to the king who was present as Africa was colonized, like at the very beginning.

And this is what he says of a scene that he witnesses. And these, placed all together in that field, were a marvelous sight. For amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well-proportioned.

Others were less white like mulattoes. Others, again, were as black as Ethiopse and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear, to those who saw them, the images of a lower hemisphere.

A vision of bodies and the ranking of bodies is a large part of what grounded European colonization.

[20:58] Now, I'm not a philosopher. I'm a pastor. So I just want to say why thinking through these things helps us understand the good news.

And then we'll get into a little bit of scripture. See, where Greek philosophy introduced, introduced and assigned value within binaries, the good news of incarnation invites us instead to integration and to wholeness and to entirety.

Where the vision of the classical body insists that we be unbroken and without holes, invulnerable. The good news of the incarnation invites us to be broken, open, in intimacy and in communion. Where the logic of empire leads us to rank bodies. The good news of the incarnation invites us into a way of seeing the material world, including bodies, through a framework of partnership and co-creation.

Okay, so we're going to take a few minutes to look at a story from Matthew. So if you have your Bible, an app, your phone, whatever you have, take it out and look up Matthew 1, 18 through 25.

[22:25] I want to put some skin kind of around these bones. Some of what I've said might feel a little bit abstract. So we're going to look at what is known as Matthew's birth story.

So Matthew 1, 18 through 25. And just a heads up, after we do this, I'm going to do a kind of like do a little Resurrection City style, the church I have pastored, and have us talk about it.

So prepare yourself. You're an introvert, prepare yourself. It's coming, all right? Okay? All right. So Matthew 1, 18 through 25.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy

Spirit.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.

[23 : 37] For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded.

He took her as his wife, but he had no marital relations with her until she had born a son and he named him Jesus. So, we're going to take about five minutes, get a little stretch break.

And what I'm asking is that you gather with one or two other people and just talk a little bit about what you notice in this story. Is there anything that you notice about incarnation? To introduce yourself, give your pronouns, get to know each other.

But what do you notice? And there are going to be a couple of discussion questions up there that can help you. Five minutes just to move and then I'll just wrap us up after we come back. All right.

[24 : 50] Thank y'all. Hopefully you met somebody that you thought was cool and you heard something about this story that you hadn't thought about. So, just a couple things and then we'll move toward communion.

So, in this story, Matthew explains to us really the origin of Jesus. This is really not so much a birth story as it is an origin story. Or as, yeah, as it is an origin story.

And in this story, you get a lot of the details that we're familiar with. You get the declaration that Jesus is Messiah. You get the angelic visitation and the do not be afraid.

You get the Holy Spirit conception, which I wonder what, if anyone talked about that in their groups.

And you get this job description of Jesus as Savior of the world.

You get the God with us that Matthew understands as the fulfillment of prophecy. Unlike the story that you get in Luke, which we'll talk about later in the series, Mary doesn't get a lot of attention here.

[25 : 55] Instead, the narrator is, throws us basically right into this situation that Joseph is in that's complicated. He's in this betrothal period with Mary, which is a period when really all the marital formalities, most of the marital formalities had already taken place between the two families that agreed they could be married.

At this point, it would have been considered adultery for either of them to go outside of that relationship. If Joseph had died, Mary would have been considered a widow.

And then since it appears that Mary has committed adultery, Joseph says that he's going to divorce her quietly. Instead of going publicly before a judge, she'll get two or three witnesses involved only.

So her shame would be at least lessened a little bit. But even as Mary doesn't encounter that fate because Joseph obeys the words of the messenger from God, there are two things I want you to take from this story.

Two things. First, notice the way that Joseph in this story challenges Christians of every generation to grapple with what it means to lose respectability for the sake of faith.

[27 : 18] Joseph is a righteous man, but his righteousness is not enough. His love of Torah is not enough. He had to go beyond righteousness and justice.

He had to go beyond in order to meet the demands of mercy and compassion. And going beyond costs him. It would have cost his family shame and honor.

It would have affected their material lives. I mean, think about how hard that would have been. Later in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, there is a dynamic of, you have heard it said, but I say to you.

And that dynamic is already present here, aimed at this community of first century Christians who are struggling with what it means to go against what is customary when you sense that it doesn't lead to life.

And I think that we as 21st century Christians are still often struggling with that same question. And then notice also that as Joseph confronts these questions, he's squarely dealing with things outside of the top part of that binary.

[28 : 28] So the second thing I want you to take away is that Joseph is dealing in embodied life, in emotion and passion and experiential truth and not in the claims and demands of logic.

We, I think, remember Joseph not because he was righteous. We often don't even remember Joseph because he was merciful.

We remember Joseph because he was open to a dream. We remember him because he was open to an inner sense, a perception in his body, a personal revelation.

And even more stunning, Joseph was open to that dream because he was prepared in contemplation. We don't often think of Joseph in association with contemplation.

Usually we give Mary that role of pondering things in her heart. Yet the phrase in verse 20, but just when he had resolved to do this, can also be understood as he considered this or when he had contemplated this.

[29 : 39] See, contemplation relocates authority, as one of my good friends says. Because of his contemplative perspective on the situation, Joseph is able to discern the desire of God from custom.

He's able to understand the way his body and his emotions lead him away from custom to the desire of God, lead him to truth.

Just as the witness to the truth of the Christian community is necessary, so is our embodied witness and experience of truth. I said at the beginning that I love Advent stories because they're both personal and political.

And I don't think it's any accident that this story of perception through embodied experience of contemplation is placed within Matthew's alternative vision of empire through the kingdom of God. Engaging the beauty of incarnation is part of how we live into that alternative vision, which is completely opposite of empire. So friends, this Christmas, may the God of all creation help us to embrace the material world.

[30 : 56] Help us to creatively engage our embodied experience as a part of making the world right. May we understand that our embrace of materiality and embodiment is a form of resistance to things as they are and that the world desperately needs this kind of resistance.

May we follow Christ, our God incarnate, more fully this Advent. Amen.