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“Why?”

A sermon by Robert Merrihew Adams

2nd Sunday after Christmas

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Colossians 1:13–20; John 1:1–18

We pray that by your grace, you yourself will be known to us, O God, as we speak and hear and think about your word, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 1¹⁴ (NRSV):

And the Word became flesh, and lived among us.

The reading we have just heard is the prologue of the Gospel according to John. It is a profound meditation on Jesus—who Jesus is, and how Jesus has come to us. It contains the New Testament’s most explicit affirmation of the incarnation of God in Jesus: “the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh, and lived among us.”

We can hardly understand this text if we do not set aside an assumption that is prevalent in many cultural contexts—the assumption that a word is something light and powerless, something unimportant and inconsequential in comparison with deeds. We are familiar with such sayings as ‘Words are cheap,’ and ‘Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.’ We know that that message is false in many contexts, but the disparagement of “mere words” remains influential.

In the typical view of biblical writers, the word of God is not a *mere* word, and human words are not supposed to be *mere* words either. The 55th chapter of the book of Isaiah presents God as saying (Isaiah 55¹⁰⁻¹¹),

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and don’t return there without watering the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

God’s word will accomplish God’s purpose, and prosper in God’s project. Such a word is no *mere* word. It is not less powerful than a deed. Indeed, it *is* a deed.

It was powerful enough to create the universe. Psalm 33⁶ declares, “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.” Similarly, in the first chapter of Genesis we read, “And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light,” and we find there a continuing rhythm of “And God said ... And it was so.” This connection of the Word with creation is echoed in John’s prologue, which declares that “all things came into being through [the Word], and without [the Word] not one thing came into being” (John 1³).

But John carries the idea further, declaring that the Word was in the beginning with God, “and the Word was God” (John 1¹). So far from being a *mere* word, God’s Word is even more than a deed. It is God, God’s very self, thinking, reasoning, planning, deciding, and in so doing creating, and in general acting.

This announces also a conception of divine revelation. In the Hebrew Scriptures the Word of God is also the word of prophecy, and the word of Torah (that is, law or guidance) received through Moses. That word too is no *mere* word. For John, however, it is not enough to have a word from God in the breath of a prophet or in writing on a scroll or even on tablets of stone. For God’s Word is God’s own self.

It is God’s own self that we want to know. Texts and doctrines can help to form our faith, but our faith and trust is to be in God personally—not in texts or doctrines for their own sake. But how can we know God’s own self? John’s answer is that “no one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1¹⁸). And how did he make

him known? “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” The Word lived a human life, and was revealed to us in that life.

That is: God became a human being. God lived a human life. The invisible was seen. The infinite took on limits. The absolutely independent depended on a mother’s care. The immortal suffered and died. The incarnation of God. It boggles the mind. *Why* did God do it? *How* could God do it? How could such a thing be possible at all? Christians have speculated about these questions for centuries.

Speculation about the ‘How?’ question leads into metaphysical arguments that get pretty technical. I love metaphysics, even quite technical metaphysics. But perhaps it’s not the most promising sermon material for Christ’s two-week birthday celebration.

Speculation about the ‘Why?’ question opens a way into more accessible thoughts about the meaning of Christmas. Why did God become a human being? The answer most obviously suggested in the Bible is that Christ came to save us from our sins. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Surely that’s at least part of the answer. But is it the whole answer? Is God’s incarnation just a rescue operation? Is it part of God’s plan A, or is it only part of a plan B that would have been superfluous if we had never sinned?

Medieval theologians posed that question quite precisely, debating whether God would have become incarnate even if the human race had not fallen into sin. Some of the more cautious, including Thomas Aquinas, said ‘No’, because saving humans from sin was the purpose for the Incarnation that was best attested in Scripture. Bolder theologians said ‘Yes.’ John Duns Scotus, perhaps the greatest theologian that Scotland has produced, held that the Incarnation was actually God’s central purpose in creating the world. According to Scotus, God began by loving the human soul of Christ, and therefore wanted to create a world in which the second person of the triune God would be united in one person with the human Christ, and joined in love to other human beings. Scotus thought this divine purpose was prior to problems of sin and evil, and independent of them. This idea has never become dogma, but it has been taken up by a number of theologians in more recent centuries too.

And in truth the idea has a Biblical basis. In his letter to the

Colossians (1:15-17), for instance, as we heard this morning, Paul writes that Christ

“is ... the first-born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... —all things have been created through him and for him.”

Everything was created *in* Christ and *for* Christ. That fits very well with the idea that the humanity of Christ is “the first creature,” as some theologians have put it, and that incarnation in that humanity was the first of God’s purposes in creation, around which the whole creation is organized, and for which everything was created.

The whole discussion is quite speculative, as the medieval theologians recognized. But ever since I heard about it I have had a strong intuition that Scotus was on the right track. For one thing, it seems to me incongruous to suppose that an infinite and omnipotent being couldn’t solve emergencies of finite human beings without doing something so extraordinary as becoming incarnate, making the infinite finite. If God has become a human being, I think it must have been because God really wanted to live a human life, really loved that life, wanted to share it with us, wanted to love us by getting close to us in that way.

On this view the Incarnation is all about God’s love for humanity. It’s God finding a way to be united with us because God loves us, a way to live as one of us because God loves human life. That by no means excludes the Biblical idea that Christ came as our Savior. For how does he save us? Is it not by making God’s love real in our lives? And is it not real in our lives because it was so real in Christ’s life? By their very existence, acts of love change relationships. By its nature as an extreme act of love, the Incarnation of God in Jesus transforms the relation between God and all human beings.

The story of the Incarnation, and of that change in our relationship with God, is affected by all the basic facts of human life. In wanting to live a human life God wanted to share in those facts. The One on whose love every creature is dependent wanted as a human to need the love of other humans, wanted to begin a human

life as a baby, utterly dependent on the care of other humans. Even Reformed Christians can take up the thought that one thing God wanted in particular was to have a mother, to need and enjoy her loving care.

Those can be happy needs. But because of human sin, the story of the Christ is also a story of conflict and reconciliation—conflict in which God’s love strives to break through barriers of blindness, fear, and self-centeredness, to overcome oppression, hostility, and hopelessness—reconciliation in which God’s love triumphs by bearing pain and forgiving. In Christ God’s love shares the suffering of the poor, the oppressed, the suffering of those who are rejected and humiliated by their neighbors, those who are tortured to death by their enemies. In the Incarnation God’s love comes close to us, kneels to wash our feet, and sits down to eat with us. It welcomes us, opens itself, so that we may enter into it, sufferers and sinners as we are, hurting and angry and fearful, so that we may grow into love. It makes our sufferings God’s own, so that we may be close to God in them.

The self-incarnating love of God is also a foundation of faith in the value of human life. Is human life really worth living? How can it not be, if God, who understands everything, really wanted to live a human life? This does not mean, ‘Human life is worth living if you are rich enough, successful enough, popular enough, educated enough, beautiful enough, healthy enough, comfortable enough, and have the right toys.’ No; if the story of Jesus tells us how God wanted to live a human life, the implication that life is worth living must apply no less to those who suffer pain or hunger, the homeless, the despised and rejected, and those who are imprisoned in the power of their enemies. The way in which God concretely counted human life worth living serves as a rebuke to glib and self-flattering calculations of “quality of life.”

Yes, the incarnate God comes as our Savior from evil and sin. It does not follow that God’s self-incarnation would have been superfluous if there had been no sin and evil. Far from it. For what is most important in salvation is not the problem that is solved, but the good that is given. And what is the good that God gives us in salvation? What is it but life in God’s love? The extraordinary love for us humans that God makes real by becoming one of us is not just a strategy for overcoming sin and evil, not a

mere *means* to our salvation. It is the very *substance* of the good that is given to us in salvation. It would be no less important to us, and to God, if there had never been any sin or evil. That love is the great gift for which we thank God in this Christmas season.