

**BECOMING HUMAN; JOHN 1:1-18; CHRISTMAS II, JANUARY 5, 2020;
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The *New York Times* Friday had two columns to help navigate the first days of 2020; one for optimists and one for pessimists. I'd like to split the difference and offer a message for realists at this start of the new year.

I want to talk today about becoming human. It's a good day to do it since we are in the second and last Sunday of Christmastide and tomorrow starts a new liturgical season; but here in Christmas we have reason to talk about becoming human because that is precisely what God did in the infant Jesus or as John says today, "the Word became flesh."

But I'd also like to focus on you and me becoming human. Yet, perhaps you're asking yourself how does a heavenly being reduce, confine, limit itself to human boundaries? And regarding us, aren't we already human? In what sense do humans become human?

In the case of God becoming human we confront a profound mystery something we will never understand, yet it is the foundation of what Christians believe: that God was in Christ, what theologians call the incarnation or the enfleshment of God.

This turns the ancient heresy that claimed Jesus was not human on its head—the belief that every human has a piece of God, a divine spark in them and Jesus happened to have more than anyone else. In other words, Jesus wasn't really human at all; he just had a good makeup artist.

According to that belief, the goal of life is to wake the spark of divine knowledge *within us* and become perfect like Adam and Eve before the fall; that is, to become less human and more divine like Jesus. This idea was very popular and a threat to the church in the first century.

But that's not what Christianity says. John reports that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; the true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. Jesus's light and glory is revealed in *human terms*, unlike those science fiction creatures from another world who can't communicate with earthlings. Jesus is one of us.

When we behold Jesus, we are like moths attracted to the light: into the kind of human relationships and experience God intends for us. That's why John opens his book with the same words that open Genesis, "In the beginning". John's gospel is a new creation story; it is about who we were created to become.

Another way to say this is that everything Jesus says and does is God showing us in *human terms* who God is or what God wants to have happen in a given situation: the healing stories that reach out to the poor and oppressed; the debates with the religious authorities over the attention he gives and time he spends with social outcasts; the parables he tells and sermons he preaches that liberate the people, that liberate you and me, from living small, from confining ourselves to a religion of rules, or trying to earn our salvation rather than to accept grace as a gift. Only a human being would understand how to convey to other human beings what it looks like to walk the extra mile or turn the other cheek; only a person who understood the limitations and the joys and sorrows of this life could teach people what sacrificial love looks like and that it is possible. In Jesus God acts and speaks and makes sense as one of us because he is one of us.

But what about us becoming human? John says we prefer to dwell in darkness and that Jesus came to his own people but his own people did not know him; we are humans who dwell much of the time far below our capacity for the good.

If we go back to the first creation story, we learn that our spiritual default system is to become like God. We want it all. We want control and power; we want things to go our way. This is the story of Adam and Eve choosing the fruit of the tree in the garden God warned them not to eat, because, the serpent said, "God knows if you do you will become like him."

So we eat the fruit, we pursue wealth, power and fame or whatever we think will give us autonomy, freedom and dominance; yet we quickly learn that we are not God because when we do what God warns against, we discover our humanity. We find out what it means to live in a world with limitations, boundaries and consequences. That it takes hard, honest work and the sweat of our brow to raise crops as Adam discovered; and that giving birth to another human as Eve did brings a world of responsibility and challenges and, yes, pain. It is in the very human limitations we think we want to be free of that we find our deepest fulfillment, rise to our best, and learn finally why we are here.

When the great revivalists preached, from Anglican George Whitfield who went up and down the eastern seaboard evangelizing the colonies to the Presbyterian Charles Grandison Finney who traveled through the northeast and even burned his way through Western New York, there were so many people showing up at the revivals they became known as the First and Second Great Awakenings and transformed America.

They weren't just one-night stands. The revivals gave birth to the spread of worker and children's rights, rights for women; public education and higher education; the establishment of hospitals and public health policies; and taking education, agriculture technology and health care to the poorest nations; and virtually all of this was done with volunteers, people serving people.

The mission and ministry of this church from the settlement house we built in the 19th century to serve young, poor German immigrants to the house being rehabbed right now, that we will be called upon to help with and is the new headquarters of Peacemakers – a program on the East Side to curb violence and build community – all of this outreach happened because this church woke up to the teachings and example of Jesus.

Yet, spiritual malaise and lethargy are real; one of the ways we live in darkness is by spending so much time in virtual worlds. We log online, engage less and less real life and forget, studies confirm, how to be human, how to empathize with other humans.

We are depressed over national politics and climate change one writer observes and feel disempowered; so we look for the next leader or policy to fix everything rather than embrace the change our nation needs in our personal lives.

Poet Tracy K. Smith puts it this way, "it's hard waking up so often to news of terror unspooling in America. Domestic terrorism. Racially motivated violence. Anti-Semitism. Environmental devastation. It's tempting to think a new chapter has just begun, one in which some new evil has been unleashed and our national work will be to devise new terms and new tools for understanding and eradicating it. It's tempting to believe that this work must live on a policy level with some legislative body.

But then Smith goes on in a tribute to Nobel laureate Toni Morrison who died last year and dedicated her artistic life not just to the health and wellbeing of African Americans but of all Americans. "The living monument of Ms Morrison's work assures us that the language of peace, justice, safety and stability must enter our imagination as they always have – not through the language of policy, but via our willingness to regard one another as worthy of attention and love.

Such ideas must be sat with, moved through, married to our vocabularies for carrying out daily life, for dealing with loss and resentment; and for remembering, for healing and for hope. This is the work, the terrain of the artist says Smith, but it is also the work, apropos of our conversation today, of those who follow the teachings and example of Jesus.

It is only by engaging life at ground level like he did that we bump up against and can respond to the darkness and confront the things he gives us strength to overcome; and when we do in a relationship or workplace situation or family dynamic to realize our best, to be fully human.

I have to tell you I have talked over the past two weeks in some depth with three young people under the age of 30, maybe even 25. Two of them are new members of this congregation. One is an engineer, the other a soon to be minted master's level social worker. What is so impressive about them is that their lives are being shaped in this early stage of their careers by what they learned as children and teenagers in the churches they grew up in.

There is a direct link from what Jesus said and did 2,000 years ago to what these young people are saying and doing with their lives today. Their goal is not to get rich or be famous or powerful. Their goal is to help people. To bring the source of their light and strength into the lives of those who still walk in the darkness of injustice or poverty or prejudice.

The other young person, a cradle Presbyterian from Western New York, was home for the holidays from Cambridge University, England where he is pursuing a master's degree in history. "How do you like studying in Cambridge," I asked. "I love it," he said, "despite the academics." Which he explained by saying, "What I've learned is that much of the culture is thinking for the sake of thinking, I want to think for the sake of doing. I want to come back to Buffalo and do my part to build a racially just and equitable city."

There are literally millions of ways to follow Jesus; if you are carrying some burden today or walking under some dark shadow here's a remedy: use your imagination and gifts to link Jesus' ideas to the world on January 5, 2020.

The optimist bets on our capacity to be better than we are. The pessimist counts on us being less than we are. But the realist knows who we are, what we're up against and what it will take to be fully human.

Here's John again, "The light was in the world. And to those who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God."

Now here's Jesus and the sermon in a sentence: "Anyone who gives up their life for my sake and for the gospel will find their life." Happy 2020. Amen.