

## LOVE HAS FOUND US

– John 1:1-14 –

One of my favorite carols, an unusual one, begins like this:

*Tomorrow shall be my dancing day.  
I would my true love did so chance  
to see the legend of my play:  
To call my true love to my dance.*

The chorus continues:

*Sing O my love, oh my love, my love  
This have I done for my true love.*

The singer in this carol is the Almighty Word, the Son of God. The play is the story of his life on earth among us. And the “dancing day” he refers to is the day of his incarnation: the day “the Word became flesh,” according to St. John.

Perhaps, though, the author of this carol had in mind these words from the apocrypha, from the Wisdom of Solomon: “For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful Word leaped down from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed.”

The word leaped down–danced–to the virgin’s womb–to the manger–to our world, and as the carol imagined, it was for love: “this have I done for my true love.”

“The word became flesh and lived among us.” With these words John makes his case: the one who was born in a stable and lived among us, the one who healed and forgave, the one who taught the people and held children, the one who died, was also the one who spoke the heavens and the earth into being, the one who is almighty and all-powerful, the one who Was, and Is, and Is to Come.

The Holy one of God has lived here, among us. As C. S. Lewis once put it, in his science fiction trilogy, we are the “visited” planet. But the word, “visited,” even the word “lived,” does not quite capture it. The real word is “tabernacled.”

According to John, God “tabernacled” with us in Jesus. And the significance of this word goes far back in Israel’s history, back to the time of the Judges. In those days Israel was a loosely organized group of tribes. There was not yet a centralized place of worship in Jerusalem, not yet a permanent home for the Ark of the Covenant, not yet a king to unite the people.

No, the Ark was housed in a tent, and carried where the people went, whether into battle, or to worship, or traveling. This tent was the “tabernacle” for the presence of God. In the same way, John believes, Jesus’ flesh was the tabernacle for the presence of God, dwelling among the people again now.

Two things are important to know about this tabernacle: First, it was a modest, and a temporary, shelter. It was, in reality, a tent, and the glory of it, and its strength, was in the Ark of the Covenant inside it. It was a tent—vulnerable to wind and rain and storms, to fire and water, frail and frayed. But inside it carried the strength of God.

“And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory.” The Word took on our frail flesh, vulnerable to disease and disappointment, to hunger and thirst, to fear and to death. The Almighty Word leaped down from heaven not to sit on a throne but to lie in a manger in a stable. The Almighty Word leaped down from heaven not to battle Rome, but to battle sin and death.

The Almighty Word leaped down from heaven to be torn and beaten on a cross for us, “and we have beheld his glory.”

Perhaps we feel more acutely our own vulnerability these days. We hear—or have felt ourselves— the impact of our faltering economy. People are losing their jobs, their homes – wondering about the predictions of hard economic times ahead. And we are still at war in Iraq and Afghanistan; terrorists attack in other parts of the world, as well. Two hundred people in Burnsville this Christmas feel the bitterness of being homeless.

And at this time of year, full of tenderness and hope, we are also especially vulnerable to disappointment, dashed hopes and feelings of inadequacy. People who are not able to muster up a large crowd of family and friends at Christmas-time feel judged by the expectations of the season. People who are not able to show their love for their families by giving lavish celebrations might feel that somehow they've let others—and themselves—down. We are made of frail flesh—even the winter wind tells us that.

Here is the second thing about tabernacles: not only are they temporary, they are movable. Once Israel built the temple, then everyone had to go to the temple to worship properly. Israel went to find God. But first, and long ago, God went to the people, and God went with the people. He went before them into battle, he went before them as they wandered and traveled. He was a movable God—not just for one place, but for every place.

“And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory.” The Word became flesh and came to where we are. We could not go up to heaven and find him, so he came down from heaven and found us. He came to the stable and the manger where the poor gathered. He came to the lepers and where the outcasts lived. He came to the prisoners and he came to those who couldn't see or walk, and he came to the ones who had not voice to tell him what they needed.

He came to those who couldn't make ends meet, and he fed them. He came to the earth, scarred by war, doomed by hate and indifference. He came to those who were lost, who were wandering, who didn't know who they were. He came to us.

In a children's story by Katherine Paterson, a father is searching for his runaway son. Two years ago they thought he was dead, but there is a new story around that his son is alive and somewhere in Washington D.C. On Christmas eve, the father goes in search of him, with only the name of a minster he thinks can help him.

He ends up at an inner city church and shelter, guided by two other runaway children, a boy and a girl. He ends up driving down streets and through neighborhoods that he had never seen before, and hoped never to see again. He learns that his son has taken a different name, and “didn’t really want to be found.” But he continues, desperate to find his son, to try to repair the breach between them.

Finally he and the other youth see a sign that the girl recognizes, the blinking light of the White Star Savings and Loan Corporation. It’s a seeding-looking building, but it’s the boarded-up house across the street that the girl points to. “I think that’s where they are staying,” she says.

The father stays in his car for awhile. The house looks uninhabited. But they notice a thin line of smoke coming from the building. Someone must be there after all. When there is no answer at the door, the three of them break in, using a credit card.

There they discover a young girl and her baby—his son’s baby. She tells him that his son is dead. The father looks around the place—cold and dirty, with rats running around the room. “Let’s get another place to stay,” he urges. But she refuses to leave. So the father decides that he will stay the night as well—to protect his grandson and to hope to know the child’s mother.

“The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” He lived in whatever bad neighborhoods we live in, broke into the house just to see us, slept on our floors to protect us from danger. Even though we had changed our names, even though we didn’t want to be found, he came to us, to our world, to heal the breach that was between us, to save us and protect us. And this he did for his true love—for you and me.

So the father slept on the floor of the old tenement house that Christmas Eve. In the middle of the night he was awakened by a rat that was attacking his grandson. He leapt up from the floor and, with a strength he didn’t know he had, attacked and killed the rat. Little did he know that his son was watching through a crack in the door.

He wasn't dead. He had been found. Love had finally found him. For so long he had doubted his father's love, but now he knew.

If ever you have doubted the father's love, now you know, "for the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son." The Word was born among us, laid in a manger, vulnerable and helpless as we are. The Word lived among us, sharing our lives, sharing our fears and our fate. The Word leapt down from heaven to seek and to find us, and continues to seek us even this day, this cold Christmas Day.

The Almighty Word went to the outskirts of town, went to the cross, went to death, seeking us, healing the breach that was between us. He still goes with us. He goes with the hungry, those made homeless by fire or fate, the lonely, the wanderers. And still the minstrel sings, "This have I done for my true love." Amen.

*Christmas Day + December 25, 2008*  
*Woodlake + Richfield*  
*Rev. Diane M. Roth*