

Jn 1:1-18
 2 January 2011
 Epiphany Sunday / 9th Day of Xmas

“Flesh and Blood”

Have I ever told you that Banu and I are fans of vampire movies? There are many that I like, but my favorite is still probably one that we saw in the theater when we were in seminary, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. I also very much like the Swedish movie that came out a couple of years ago, *Let the Right One In*. Banu got me started watching the *Twilight* movies, which I grudgingly will say aren't **too** bad! However, I do have one big complaint with their contribution to the vampire mythos: sunlight doesn't hurt them. Rather, it makes them sparkle!

Why do I begin with vampires? It's directly related to our worship today. In the first century, as word gradually spread that the early church was eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ, many non-Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, were horrified. Prohibitions against blood in the Hebrew scriptures go back as far as Genesis: “you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (9:4).

Some called the Christians cannibals. And though the legend of the vampire goes back to ancient times, we can't really pin that one on the early Christians.

Still, hearing this, one might be forgiven if there were some doubts: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Those are the words of Jesus in John 6:54-56. To the uninitiated, it probably **would** sound like cannibalistic or vampiric actions are in order!

This isn't the **only** place where the gospel of John speaks quite insistently about the flesh and blood of Jesus. Later, I'll mention its role in the encounter with Pontius Pilate, in chapters 18 and 19. But right now, flesh and blood has a prominent role in today's reading: the introduction to the gospel.

The introduction, like the book that follows it, is very different from the other gospels. The other three don't have the level of philosophical and theological reflection that we find in John. Understanding that this is a somewhat subjective statement, this gospel is the most beautiful at a poetic level—although, Luke probably runs a close second!

These eighteen verses are packed with meaning. I'll only try to **unpack a little** of it!

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (v. 1). Does that first verse remind you of anything? If it reminds you of the first verse of Genesis, then that is deliberate. John wants to identify Jesus the Christ with the eternal living Word, the Word that transcends creation.

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” That includes life, “and the life was the light of all people” (vv. 3-4). Here's some of that poetic beauty I spoke of. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (v. 5). What does that mean?

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The Greek word for “overcome” (καταλαμβάνω, *katalambanō*) has several nuances. It can mean “to grasp.” In the physical sense, it would suggest “seizing” somebody or something. In the mental sense, it would refer to “understanding.”

It can also have the sense of “detecting.” In chapter 8, when some scribes and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman “**caught** in adultery,” the same word is used. In this case, she is both detected **and** seized! (On a side note, we hear nothing about the **man** being detected and/or seized—nor about how word came to the scribes and Pharisees who detected her!)

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness did not grasp it, or seize it, or understand it, or detect it. More than that, the darkness is **incapable** of grasping or understanding the light!

The gospel’s introduction tells us that John the Baptist testified to the light. He testified that the Word, “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (v. 9). But how can the Word that transcends creation come into the world? How can something that isn’t creation **become** creation? That makes no sense whatsoever! But that’s part of the deep meaning of the Christmas event.

With verse 14, we have something of a summary of today’s reading. “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The Word became flesh and lived among us. That’s how John pictures Christmas. There’s no messing around with a baby in a manger. Like I said earlier, there’s more of a philosophical and theological focus.

As I was researching some stuff for this sermon, I came across an article with an eye-catching title by Jennifer Glancy, who teaches Bible at the University of Richmond. The title was “Torture: Flesh, Truth, and the Fourth Gospel.”¹ This is where Pontius Pilate enters the picture.

In the article, she wonders, echoing Pilate in his interview of Jesus, “What is truth?” Expanding on that, she asks, “Does truth dwell in flesh?”² If verse 14 is correct and the eternal living Word has come to dwell in flesh, then it seems that we have to say that, yes, truth does in fact dwell in flesh.

That is the assumption of the Roman Empire and its project of torture and crucifixion—that truth can be extracted from flesh and blood. Indeed, that’s the assumption of all who torture, that truth can be wrenched from the body.

Glancy speaks of three intentions of torture, which sometimes may overlap.³ There is “judicial” torture, in which the intent is to discover the truth. (You know what I mean: “We have ways of making you talk!”) Secondly, there is “penal” torture; in this case, the idea is to punish the person.

Finally, there is “terroristic” torture, which is part of a campaign to send a message to the rest of the population. You make an example out of somebody. Add to these the element of sexual humiliation (people crucified by the Romans were stripped naked and mocked), and we are left with some uncomfortable parallels with our own behavior in Iraq.

¹ Jennifer A. Glancy, “Torture: Flesh, Truth, and the Fourth Gospel,” *Biblical Interpretation* 13:2 (2005).

² Glancy, 107.

³ Glancy, 115.

For those who would say that this talk of terror and torture has no place in the Christmas story, I would remind us of Herod's attempt to kill the Christ child. His paranoia results in the massacre of numerous little boys. Sadly, that kind of brutality has a very real-world feel to it.

In order to protect their young one from Herod, Joseph and Mary are forced to flee to Egypt. They have to seek asylum; they're fleeing political persecution. In Jesus Christ, we worship one who has been a refugee. We worship one who, later in life, has been a victim of torture. Still, even though darkness does its worst, it still can't overcome the light.

Almost five centuries ago, Martin Luther expressed it well in verse: "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us / We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us / The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him / His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure / One little word shall fell him." The Word became flesh and lived among us.

What does that mean for us? Can we think of ways in which we see or experience the Word in flesh? Are there ways in which we know that there is truth in flesh, in this physical stuff?

We all struggle with the darkness. On struggling with darkness, Richard Rohr notes that it "can be experienced as pain and handicap." It can be "experienced by struggling with the riddles, dilemmas, and absurdities of life." Commenting on verse 5, he says, "Like physical light itself, true light must both include and overcome the darkness."⁴ We have to be honest with ourselves; we have to be honest with God. We have to dare to look at the darkness within.

I pray—I hope!—that we don't **literally** engage in torture, but torture can have different meanings. We torture each other in a multitude of ways. I'm sure that we can think of plenty of cases in which we find that to be true. We torture ourselves, and we are tortured. And there are consequences. It affects our health. It affects us as the body politic, and it affects us as flesh and blood bodies.

Yet, even though we surely know that darkness can't overcome the light, at some level—and in some ways that we can't quite put our fingers on—we turn away from the light. We need to let the light, the light that enlightens everyone, penetrate our darkness.

That doesn't happen by accident. Properly responding to Christ's call to eat his flesh and drink his blood is a matter of will. As the early church father Ignatius of Antioch put it, "the Blood of Jesus Christ is love."⁵ That's what it takes to become aware of the body of Christ, be it in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist—or in the sacrament of everyday life.

I recently came across this New Year's resolution: "an inspiring resolution for the New Year involves taking the time to open to God through spiritual practices. Along with our New Year's resolutions regarding diet and exercise, we may also choose to spend more time opening to God's light and choosing to bless others. The light is here—within us and all around us—but we need to wake up to its beauty and power."⁶

⁴ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 35.

⁵ footnote in Archibald Robertson & Archibald Plummer, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 252.

⁶ www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2010-2011/Christmas-II-2011-A.shtml