



VILLAGE
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

Embodied

SCRIPTURE:
John 1: 14-16

July 24, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

My baby will be 14 months old this week. He has spent these past couple months of his life attempting to perfect the art of walking. Witnessing this child learning how to be human is extraordinary.

The amount of effort required to walk is really something. He has to first get his chubby feet flat on the floor. He puts his hands on the floor and pushes his bottom up in the air. He usually waits there a minute, feeling the sensation of weight on his legs. But then slowly, his knees bend, his head comes up, and he pushes from a squat into standing. That alone took weeks.

But then to move. One foot in front of the other. All while keeping his head—that's just a little bigger than the rest of him—upright.

He's not always successful. His wears a little crown of bruises around his head, marking just how difficult this is. I don't know what the record is for holding your breath, but I'm pretty sure I've broken it watching him do this. And then, just like that, he's walking around the house. Climbing onto the couch. Chasing the dogs.

A friend recently said, "It's like they have to learn the whole world with their whole bodies." It's true. Our learning begins as a full-body experience.

Witnessing my child learn how to be human has been the greatest learning experience of my life. And it's opened me to wonder about so many things. I wonder about the mysteries my child knows, using his body this way, mysteries I've long forgotten. I wonder what we lose as our exploration moves more and more into our heads. And I wonder about our faith and how it is that our God chose this precarious flesh-dwelling existence.

This is perhaps the greatest mystery of our faith. The gospel of John points to it most clearly. John is a little more poetry than history. So John begins the story of Jesus' life by telling us, "In the beginning was the Word." ... "And the Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us."

The Message translation of this text says, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." That gets a littler closer the original Greek, which says something like, "it pitched a tent among us."¹ These are some of the most extraordinary words in scripture. John doesn't bother with Mary and Joseph, angels, or shepherds. Instead, he pulls the curtain back, begins at the very beginning, so that we might see what's really going on.

God chose to be born as human. In previous eras, there were temples, and sacrifices, and priests that were required to be the go-betweens of God and the people. But here, God does something brand new. God comes close. And lest we forget that God is God—this is not how God had to do this. God spoke to prophets and appeared as fire and smoke and voice in the sky. God could have entered into the story in any number of ways.

But here, John claims, and we believe, that God chose to be born of a woman. Chose to ask Mary's permission—to take up residence in her womb. Chose to experience for himself the chubby-feet and wobbly-leg phase. Wore his own crown of bruises around his little head. Caused Mary to hold her breath and Joseph to saw the corners off all the furniture. God chose the whole of it. And was born into this fleshy existence that we might never need priest or offering or temple to be near the Holy again.

¹ Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2018, p. 91.

The theological word we came up with for this is ‘incarnation.’ It means ‘God embodied’ and ‘God made flesh.’ This word has been around since the first council of Nicaea in the year 325 CE.

It was one of the first things we fought about as Christians. Just who was Jesus? Was he half human, half God? The Council of Chalcedon, some 200 years later, set out to debate just this. They refined earlier decisions. Christ was fully God, fully human. ‘Homousia,’ or two substances co-existing together. Entire lives were spent debating this.

It can feel abstract to us now, but questions about how God dwelled in human skin—we’ve been wondering this way for a long time, because it has implications for how we live. Those early church councils knew: The incarnation mattered.

It still matters. And we’re living in days when the consequences of not recognizing that the Holy dwells in flesh—it’s putting all our bodies at risk.

Those early church councils knew this mattered. So they argued a lot. And wrote a lot. And came to conclusions that have been the basis of our theology. I believe those early councils did faithful work. And, I believe that faith was not their only motivating factor.

These were gatherings of educated men who had been summoned together by the Roman Emperor. Asserting power, control, defining God, asserting a singular way of thinking—there was much to be gained here. They knew how much the incarnation mattered.

The Protestant Reformation later freed us from control of the Roman Catholic Church. The identity of Christ meant that we each had access to God on our own. We appealed to the doctrine of the “Priesthood of all Believers.” No help was required from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The Reformers declared no one would tell us how to think... except, maybe, them? So they wrote volumes. And shaped Protestantism with a skepticism of anything ‘artistic.’ We would not be influenced by anything—icon or artist or music—that was a little too exuberant.

Then Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” And the Enlightenment solidified the idea that rational thought is the highest expression of human

existence. ‘Rational’ thinking was elevated to a sacred endeavor. ‘Objectivity’ was the goal—defined by the men who set it. Descartes, and others, enshrined the philosophy of dualism—the idea that separates mind and body. ‘Thinking’ was most important. The mind and the soul were one in the same. The body was temporary, expendable.

When this philosophy joined hands with Christianity in the New World, it had no problem destroying indigenous bodies or enslaving Black bodies. If anyone didn’t reach the sacred criteria of ‘thinking’ like the powerful men did, then they had no value. We could pray for their souls while destroying their bodies.

The incarnation matters. Our religious history is filled with a variety of men, with a variety of motives, telling us how to ‘think’ about God. And many of them were faithful. And many of them were right. But the mystery has always been bigger than our ‘thinking.’ God did not come to us as an idea, but as a body. And when we elevate our ideas over our bodies, there are consequences.

The precarious relationship between Christianity and the Empire (the governmental power of the day) should lead any rational person to wonder why we still claim this faith at all. And yet, I do. I still claim this faith, because I trust the incarnation. My mom taught me the faith while she learned it herself. We read the stories together and she told me about the God she knew—the one we could talk to whenever we wanted. The one who would talk back with feelings in our bellies—who would tell us when something was wrong, or right, or when to pay attention.

I persist in claiming this faith, because I have felt the breath of the Spirit raise the hair on my arms when I am meant to notice. I have understood God’s calling through the sensation of rage that begins in my stomach and summons me to speak. And I have felt the embrace of a God who has been pointed to by flawed humans throughout history, but cannot be contained by any of it.

If God was merely an idea, I would have abandoned it long ago. But I know a God who is revealed in human flesh. Because I have felt Her in mine. Perhaps it is irrational of me. But perhaps

rationality isn't what our forefathers taught us it was. There are other ways of knowing. Other ways of being. And we are living in days when we need to pay attention to those, too.

Science has caught up to this. Neurobiologists have researched what they call 'somatic markers.' They've actually found that the feelings we experience as bodily sensations help us process information and make decisions. In fact, we cannot have rational thinking and decision making without our intuitive bodies—without our gut reactions. Rational thought, it turns out, is only possible with a partnership between cognition and emotion.²

At the same time, trauma research has taught us that the body remembers. Trauma recovery often involves movement, because for the body to unlearn and relearn, it requires more than just the mind.

Students of spiritual practices know this body research by another name. The contemplative masters, for thousands of years, have taught us to listen to our bodies. They know that the Holy speaks to us here.

In short: Descartes was wrong. My mom was right. Our bodies are not subject to our minds. The opposite is often true. We are living in days when we must reclaim the incarnation—reclaim the sacredness of our own bodies, and the bodies of everyone else, for so much is at stake. Children's bodies are destroyed in their schools—as we prioritize our 'ideas' of gun rights. The bodies of those who live in the path of fire and flood are constantly in jeopardy. The bodies of our Queer youth are at risk. Immigrant bodies are rendered invisible, disposable. Black bodies are destroyed, over and over and over again. Sixty shots, no trial. And we debate the merits of a movement, declaring over and over and over that Black lives don't matter.

And now... now, in nine days, we will be the first state in the nation to vote on the value of the bodies of those capable of pregnancy.³ We will vote on whether Christian fundamentalism has been successful in disassociating us from our bodies,

making us believe that our ability to carry life is sacred, but our ability to determine the path of our own lives is not.

When we elevate 'ideas' over bodies, there are consequences. And God knew this. That is why God did not enter into human history as an idea. God came embodied. Flesh and bone. We have access to the Divine and the Divine has access to us. This matters. Because if I know that God is revealed to me in my own body, I have to trust that God is revealed to you in yours. If God sought to liberate us from anyone else having power over our access to God, then I have to believe God continues to liberate us from any power that seeks to control.

If God shows up in bodies, then any restriction on a person's ability to make their own decisions about their own body is antithetical to the gospel. It flies in the face of our God who trusted Mary with his whole body—wobbly knees, bruised head and all.

I know that some of you don't want me to talk about this. I know we're not all on the same page here. And I think that's okay. I want to be able to disagree, because the mystery of God is bigger than all of us. But we need to remember that not all ideas are equal. Our history reminds us that some ideas are dangerous. And when an idea is born of our religion and enforced by the empire, it is always the dangerous kind.

So, I want to be able to debate matters of faith. But I also want us to understand that if our ideas endanger real, living, breathing bodies, then they are not ideas that our incarnate God is willing to entertain. God chooses bodies, every time.

History has always been cluttered with those who want to define God and control the people. They cause a lot of damage. They cut up church signs in an attempt to remove 'women' from our signs and our story. Bodies are destroyed by them, so we must be vigilant against them.

But they don't win. God's love was born in human flesh—a mystery too big to ever be contained, a mystery that continues to be revealed through

² Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*. New York: Penguin Group, 1994.

³ In reference to the Aug. 2, 2022 vote on the proposed Kansas constitutional amendment that could permit the state legislature to decide whether to allow or ban abortions in Kansas.

each and every one of us. So trust that God indwells in you, too.

Trust that you are sacred, your entire being, that you are loved, no matter the choices you've made, no matter what's been done to you, no matter what those in power say about you. Trust that God's love is calling all of us to a better way of being and that despite the death throes of old ways happening around us, we will get there.

New signs are easily made. New generations are taking up the mantles of our grandmothers. New

bodies are discovering their own liberation and when you know it in your bones, it can't be taken away. And every day, new babies are learning to walk, being raised by those who will teach them to march, to ensure liberation is fought for in this and every day.

For the word became flesh. And from God's fullness, we have received grace upon grace upon grace and there is enough for all of us.

Let us pray: Embodied God, dwell in us, that we might know we were made for more. Amen.