

Journey to the Heart of God
Part 5: Incarnation
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes
Countryside Community Church
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I. The Word Made Flesh

Over the course of the last four Sundays, you have heard from three Tri-Faith clergy who were invited here to share their thoughts about what gifts Judaism and Islam bring distinctively to the Tri-Faith basket. No one is claiming in this series that the gifts shared by the other traditions are exclusive to them, but only that all of our traditions tend to emphasize certain gifts over others in a distinctive and joyful way.

Rabbi Stoller shared his joy over the three foundational practices of Judaism: Prayer, reading and reflecting on the Torah, and doing good works for others. While the other two traditions also do these things, in Judaism they are the primary three pillars upon which everything stands. Therefore, everything else can only be adequately understood in light of these three pillars.

Rabbi Azriel shared the particular way that Jews find hope in our world: specifically the ways they find hope in the idea that the Messiah has not yet come. This sense of ongoing expectation, he feels, leads the Jewish faithful to ask themselves, "How can I do the work of the Messiah today, whether or not the Messiah comes tomorrow?" Certainly, any Christian who believes there is no work to do because the Messiah has already come would do well to listen to their Jewish sisters and brothers. For, as our Jewish sisters and brothers might remind us, if you are not doing the work of the Messiah, then even if the Messiah has already come, he (or she) has not yet come to you. You have not yet let the Messiah into your life.

When Imam Jamal preached here, he reflected on the amazing nuances of a single Arabic word in the Qur'an: "good," as in "good word." He also shared sixteen of the 99 "beautiful names of God" at our 11 a.m. service, and the 5 Pillars of Islamic faith and practice at our 9 a.m. service. Here again, we found distinctive differences between our two faiths. Yet we also found that we draw astonishingly similar conclusions from our differing beliefs, including the conclusion that God is revealed in Jesus in a special and unique way.

Now, for the next two Sundays, it's our turn to reflect on what gifts Christianity distinctively adds to the basket of Tri-Faith blessings. Or, at least it is *my* turn! So here goes.

I want to start with a story – a story not from the Bible, and not about Jesus, but about art. Specifically, an experience some of you know already that I had in 1985 in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. The first time I ever cried in front of a piece of art was while standing before a giant mural painted by Claude Monet. It was one of eight large murals, each featuring a different, impressionistic view of Monet's famous gardens in Giverny.

The mural that caught my eye was quite simple, really. There was a pond. Only a horizontal section of the pond, actually. It was framed by two willow trees, between which floated a smattering of water lilies here and there among the delicate ripples of the pond's surface. As I stood and stared at these features, however, I realized that there was much more going on in the painting than simple water lilies floating in water. The painting seemed almost to be alive! I could not only see the ripples, but could *feel* them. As I gazed at the water I realized that I was seeing not only its surface, but simultaneously seeing clear through to the muddy bottom. It blew my mind. How on earth could you create this illusion in a painting?

Just as my head was swirling with that sense of Monet's mastery, something new appeared. I realized that I was seeing not just the surface and the bottom together, but shadows on both the surface and the bottom – shadows cast by trees that would have been *behind me* had I been standing at the edge of the actual pond.

Emotions of awe and wonder welled up within me as I observed a whole menagerie of little brush strokes painted seemingly at random all over the painting – strokes of blue, orange, lavender, red, and other colors – that softened the painting to depict more of a memory of the pond than a photorealistic view. All these, "random," multi-colored strokes seemed to lift themselves off the canvas and speak to *exactly* what I was feeling on the *inside* as I gazed upon the painting on the outside!

That's when the tears started rolling. Somehow, some way, Monet's painting was showing me a snapshot of my soul's response to the scene even as he was depicting many different layers that existed in the scene itself. I cried like a baby.

Now, having just described one of the most moving experiences I have ever had in front of art, I also note that none of you are crying like babies right now. Have you no soul?!

Of course you have soul. The problem is that, no matter how carefully and precisely I describe this scene, no amount of words can adequately convey anything but the palest reflection of the experience one might have standing before the mural as I did in 1985.

The point is this: There are certain experiences that are so deep, and tap you into Reality on such a fundamental level, that no amount of words can possibly convey your experience to others. There is a place inside us that is so rich with meaning that all words become meaningless. All attempts to describe the experience merely point beyond themselves to a Reality that is "caught" more than "taught."

You may be wondering at this point why I am discussing my experience of a Monet painting when the topic for today is Christianity's distinctive contribution to the Tri-Faith basket. It is really quite simple, even as I've spent my entire life trying to wrap my mind around it. According to Judaism and Islam, God's ultimate revelation to humanity is made manifest in a book – the Torah for Jews and the Qur'an for Muslims. In classic Christian belief, however, the fullness of God's revelation is not found in a book but a *person*. God's "Word" may have existed since the beginning, but Jesus is thought to be God's "Word *made flesh*." Incarnate.

Now, this belief has led a lot of people onto highly speculative goose chases in which people ask themselves if this means Jesus was God or not. Some of these goose chases are found in the scriptures themselves. But to me, these speculations – at best – distract us from the main point and, at worst, cause deep, unnecessary divisions between Christianity and other religions, and between Christians and other Christians.

What is truly special about God choosing to be revealed in a person over a book is that it reveals two very important things about God, and our relationship with God, from the very start:

(1) First and foremost, what Jesus reveals is that the majesty and mystery of God is so deeply experiential that no amount of words can possibly come close to

describing it. Therefore, any attempt to claim that words – written or spoken – can represent fully what God is trying to tell us by sending Jesus into the world is absolutely contrary to the revelation itself. It's like claiming that you don't need to stand before a Monet painting to "really get" what the painting is about. If this claim is in error, imagine the error of claiming that the Bible's words contain the fullness of God's revelation!

(2) Building on the above, we find in Jesus that, while words are important (e.g., his teachings, commands, and parables), Jesus' actions speak far louder. It is little wonder that, so far as we are aware, Jesus never wrote any of his words down. Not a single one! Why would he need to? In reaching out and touching those thought to be untouchable, Jesus teaches us far more about living a God-filled life than he could by using words alone. What effect would the Cross have on us if Jesus only ever *spoke* about the need to give your life in order to save it?

As St. Francis of Assisi once observed, we should preach the Gospel at all times, and once in awhile we should even use words. Certainly in our day we are finding numerous public figures who preach eloquently about the need for America to be a more Christian nation. Yet their actions often speak far louder than their words – negatively or positively.

II. Flesh Made Spirit

There is a third truly special thing about God choosing to be revealed in the person of Jesus that is worth lifting up this morning: To "know" Jesus – and therefore what God is trying to reveal through him – we must *encounter* Jesus. Based on our encounter, each of us will find a different message spoken directly to our soul. Again, it's like Monet's mural in the Musée de l'Orangerie. In order to really "know" it, you must stand before it for yourself, looking deeply into it, letting it "speak" to you in whatever way it will. Chances are that if we were all to take a field trip to Paris this morning to stand before the very mural I was describing, each of us would experience it differently, drawing as many different messages from the encounter as there are people. So it is with Jesus. When we encounter Jesus, each of us is going to bring away different conclusions we have derived from the experience.

There's a problem here, of course: Jesus no longer walks this earth. As much as we may want the experience, there is no way to encounter "God's Word made flesh" in our day. To continue the metaphor, it is as if Monet's mural was burnt in

a fire long ago (or hung on a cross ...). How then are we to experience its many messages and meanings for our lives?

Surely, all hope of experiencing God's revelation would be lost if not for one thing. The Gospel of John conveys what that one thing is in its story of the disciples' encounter with Jesus after the resurrection. Jesus breathes on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In other words, Jesus' spirit would reside with his disciples long after his body was gone. While the many messages of Monet's mural may be lost if his mural were to catch fire, there is something about Jesus that is far more powerful than Monet's mural ever could be. We may not be able to encounter Jesus physically, but we will always be able to encounter him spiritually. As the scriptures tell us, "spirit speaks to spirit." When it does, God's Spirit becomes incarnate through the actions we take in response to the encounter, not merely through our words about it.

In this way, our distinctive gift to the Tri-Faith is very simple. We offer our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers the gift of Jesus. Not the Christ of Christian doctrine or dogma. Not the Christ whose identity as Son of God must be affirmed in order to make it through the Pearly Gates. Just Jesus, in whom God's Word became flesh, and whose *personhood* points beyond himself and takes on flesh and blood in the world right now ... *in us!*