

Reflective Light of Human Flesh

In my previous life, I was a large game hunter. I didn't love killing things, but elk hunting was an inexpensive and healthy way to feed a family. I lived in Hinsdale County, Colorado, which was 97% public land, 50% of which was designated as wilderness. Our population density was roughly one person for every two miles. And hunting there was nothing like it is in Virginia. They gave out limited tags and you were permitted one specific week in which to get your animal. I almost always hunted alone because it increased my odds. One of my most successful spots had a trailhead about an hour drive from my house, 45 minutes from cell service, and then about a 45-minute hike in. Evenings were most successful there, so I would hike in during the afternoon, waiting until the last shred of daylight passed because the animals wouldn't come out until dusk, and then I would make my way back in the dark. The path was not like trails here. In the remote mountains, it was unkempt game trails dictated by the landscape rather than the footing. On the way back there was a place where I had to leave the path and head over a rise to get back to my vehicle, but it was hard to find in the dark, and the first few times I hunted there, I hiked much longer than necessary because I missed the turn. I was pretty independent and loved the isolation, but occasionally, after that many hours of being so utterly alone, miles from another human, in the dark, in mountain lion country, I would get the willies. One year in particular I got spooked on my way back. And as I was approaching the spot I needed to turn; I saw a light shining at me and my heart stopped because I thought it was eyeballs. As I got closer, I realized someone had put a reflective push pin in a tree near the turn. It was no bigger than the head of a pencil and...it didn't create its own light, but it reflected the light from my headlamp. In a place so entirely devoid of light, the brightness of that reflection was pronounced. After that, every time I hiked out, I felt such comfort when I saw that reflection because I knew I hadn't missed the turn, and I was almost back.

We will return to this idea in a minute, but before we do we are going to discuss some theology. Hopefully the sugar from all the Christmas cookies will help fuel us through.

We all love Christmas! We love the creche, the furry animals in the stable and the baby Jesus. But we don't always make the connection about why Mary's infant son, not the resurrected Christ, but the nursing, crying, spitting up, not sleeping, explosive pooping, child has anything to do with us. So, let us consider "Incarnational Theology". Theology is the study of God. Incarnation is when God inhabits a human form. Let's discuss why God in a body matters.

The world into which Jesus was born and Christianity developed was a pre-scientific age without medical care, under Roman rule where human life had very little value and life expectancy was half of what it is now. Jesus' ministry became primarily about healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, feeding the hungry, and casting out demons so people could live fuller lives...in their bodies. Later, Christians reminded themselves of the importance of Jesus' human body by creating and reverencing icons depicting Jesus's body and crucifixes with Jesus' body attached to a cross. Since the earliest days, we have recited the creeds of the church that name Jesus and his experience in his body, not just his identity as the risen Christ. So, we can all agree that the incarnation of Jesus mattered because his body mattered. But why?

Before Jesus came, God dwelt on earth in the ark of the covenant which was housed in the temple. Now, the Spirit of God dwells in us and our bodies are temples where God's presence exists. Perhaps we can accept that better if we're looking at a beautiful body, an athletic one in its mid-twenties, with extreme intelligence, and endless upward mobility. But let's take a minute and consider the reality of what it means to exist in a body.

Human bodies do not start out with the elegance of animals like horses who can immediately run around, escape danger, and feed themselves. Humans can't even walk for a year and in that time, they fall down and hurt themselves constantly. Yes, even God's son had to fail countless times before he mastered his balance or the ability to get food to his own mouth. Bodies never stop changing, growing, floundering, falling and developing, until they master something only to begin weakening and deteriorating. And that's the pattern for typical bodies, saying nothing of disabled or differently abled bodies and minds that never perform in standard ways. The fact that Jesus existed in human flesh dignifies the human experience, giving us the confidence to know that being human is not our problem. Being human, in all its iterations and varieties, is actually our touchpoint with the divine. In fact, the earliest Christians understood our humanity to be a type of divinity when we use our bodies to perform God's work in the world. The second century bishop of Alexandria, St. Athanasius explained the purpose of the Incarnation by saying that "God became man, that man might become god." Indeed, **we** are the body God has and uses in this world.

Take a moment to glance at your hands. Can you see the design of your fingerprints or the pattern of the lines on your palm? Those are unique to you, just like everything else about you. It doesn't matter if that hand can play an instrument, write a letter, or has any dexterity in it at all. As a child of God, that hand belongs to a human who God created to participate in the family business in a way that only you can. Not every body has the same capacity, inclinations, or potential. It doesn't matter. Every human body, no matter how perfectly formed or how deformed, no matter how capable or weak, participates in God's story in some unique and valuable way. To get a firmer handle on our unique role in this cosmic story, let's push the theological envelope one bit further and consider "the trinity".

St. Athanasius said that as soul and flesh makes one human person, so "God and man is one in Christ". The incarnation, as the theological linchpin of the Trinity, is essential to our

understanding of God and also of our role with God. One God, existing in three persons is inherently relational and interdependent. God the Father sent Jesus in the flesh, indwelt with God's spirit, to show us how to be human; how to participate in God's story. For God to accomplish the work God wanted done on this earth, God needs us to participate. God sent Christ in a messy, drooly, toothless baby to show us that growth and development and inability and vulnerability are all essential parts of the story! The omnipotent God of creation was made helpless because God wanted our help. God's story cannot be told or demonstrated through strength alone.

So, look back at your hands. Seriously! No matter how able or disable, you think you are to participate in the work of the gospel, you are ideally suited just as you are. Our hands have all been crafted and formed by Almighty God through a lifetime of experiences to perfectly carry God's story into this world. In fact, our ability and self-sufficiency only serve to discredit the message of the Christmas story. So, let's not hide our frailties. God didn't hide the frailties of Jesus. It was through baby Jesus' neediness that God used human participation. None of us can or should do God's work alone. We need one another to be human, to dignify the human condition which naturally requires others to participate. God's story is one of collaboration

John's gospel says, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it". The best thing about light is that no matter how little of it there is, it always cuts through the darkness. Darkness can never extinguish light. Light always wins, and even reflected light overpowers the darkness. Sometimes we carry God's light. Other times we reflect the light we receive from others. Remember the way I felt when I saw that reflective pin in an endless forest of darkness? There are times when our lights burn low, but light always penetrates the darkness and even reflected light can help show someone else the way home. May we be a people who use our bodies, in both strength and weakness, to shine God's light into the darkest corners of this world. Amen.