

**Final part of a Fall Worship Series:
Words Matter: Proclaiming our Faith**

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Tenth grade Modern European History class. One more time, I am daydreaming, staring at the ceiling. Ms. Jackson’s voice booms out, brings me back to earth, “Ilgenfritz! The British shall inherit the seas and the French the land. But ah, the Germans! They shall inherit the heavens!”

I love day dreaming, it’s reality that I sometimes struggle with.

At times my colleagues catch me drifting off and have to call me back into the conversation, “Peter, where have you gone?”

I have been known to plan entire projects - who needs to do what, by when, only to realize a week later that just because I have thought about it doesn’t mean it is done. I actually have to do something.

The word for today, the final word in this fall preaching series on “words of faith” is “Incarnation”.

Incarnation means to make something real. To “embody” something, to bring it to life.

It’s a great word for this of us who love the “idea” of community but struggle with the realities of life together.

A great word for those of us who love the “idea” of Thanksgiving dinner, but not so much the “reality” of baking the turkey and mashing the potatoes.

For two hundred years the early church struggled over how to speak of this Jesus in whom they experienced God made “real”, “alive” to them in a way that they had never experienced before. God being made “real”, “incarnate” in a person.

One of the earliest statements the early church wrote about who this Jesus, this “incarnation” of God is, comes from a letter to the Christian community in Collosae, a town in what is now eastern Turkey. It is written in the form of hymn, a poem in fact, for it seeks to express something that is finally beyond words, that very presence of Mystery, of God, alive and among us.

Listen for the word of God:

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created

through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

(Colossians 1:15-20)

The church has continued to struggle over how to speak of this Jesus and what it means that he is the one who makes God “incarnate”, real. What it means that of all the ways God is revealed to us, that for Christians, God is uniquely made real in a person.

The church has continued to wrestle over “how” God became incarnate, “real” in Jesus. Is this something that Jesus himself “knew” or is this the testimony of the early church in reflecting on his life, death and resurrection?

The church has continued to wrestle with whether this Jesus is the “only” way that God is revealed and what it means that others have experienced God’s presence in others besides him.

But despite our differences, maybe we can agree that this Jesus is worthy of giving our hearts to. For what is clear is that this “incarnation” of God that people have experienced in Jesus has changed people’s lives. Some of ours here today. Like the author of Colossians, some of us can testify that this Jesus is creating in us, calling us forth to new life, giving us hope to walk into the future with faith and trust.

This God who comes not as a new idea to be learned, but a man to be met.
Not as a rule to be copied but a man to follow.
Not something finally to “understand” but a love to give ourselves over to.
Not an “ascent” of the mind but the “descent” of God here and now into you and your life.

I know that there are innumerable ways that this reality, this incarnation of God I meet and see in Jesus has changed my life. I can name some of those ways. And finally, it all seems to come down to this: Jesus is the one who calls me out. The “incarnation” of God I see in Jesus, this meeting of human and divine, calls me out of my safe places and comfort zones, to meet the living presence of God here in and between us.

Jesus, the incarnate one, is the one who calls me out of isolation into community.

Calls me out of my removed, “all is just fine, thank you” safe and distanced emotions and feelings into a “felt” life, a real life, a human life, shows me what such a “human” life can be like.

Calls me out to live “my life” with eyes open to meeting the Christ among us now, who comes and meets us, here in and between us all.

As any of us who have come out, come clean, with some truth about our lives know, this is not always easy work. We like to keep our lives contained, in control. And yet the

God who meets us in the “incarnate” one of Jesus, does not leave us alone with our own self-contained notions of our lives and relations with others. He is always calling us forth into life and relationship. No, not always easy, but life-giving, life-saving as well.

Last month I went to hear Paul Harding and met James.

Paul Harding won the Pulitzer Prize this year for his novel, Tinkers. I am excited to hear him speak at the downtown branch of the Seattle Public Library. I bike downtown, and get a seat right in the middle of the second row.

As soon as I sit down I know that I will not be having the quiet evening by myself that I have imagined.

The man in front of me turns around, “Hey”.

“Hi, my name’s Peter,” reaching out my hand.

“James.”

“Good to meet you.”

I ask if he has read the book.

He tells me that in the 1960’s he made bombs for the Black Panthers in Chicago.

“We could have done it. We could have blown up the Hancock Tower.”

I tell him that I am glad he didn’t.

Glad that he hadn’t had to live the rest of his life with having done that.

James reaches out, grasps my hand.

“I got nothing against white people”, he says, and then goes on to tell me about Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam in South Chicago.

I tell him that I know where the Nation of Islam headquarters are, not far from where I lived in Chicago in Hyde Park.

“I know Hyde Park”, he says.

I know that I might as well have said that I lived on the moon. The world I lived in during the early 1990’s in Hyde Park was three miles and a world away from where James had lived.

James reaches out, grasps my hand.

“James, the lecture is starting. I need to pay attention to this”, pulling out my yellow legal pad and pen.

He reaches out, grasps my hand.

Tinkers is one of the most extraordinary novels I have read. It's a story about George, an elderly New Englander who is dying. 136 hours before he dies, he begins to hallucinate. He sees his whole house toppling down on top of him, his sister, children and his father. George's father sold an assortment of foodstuffs and household items from his horse drawn wagon in rural Maine. One day, when George was a young boy, his father walked on by their family farm and never came home again.

Paul Harding was pestered by one of his writing professors to send him a copy of this novel that he kept talking about, had been working on for years. One night, Harding took what were just a collection of short pieces he had written, a couple of paragraphs here to a few pages there, cut them out and spread them on his living room floor. He spent that night, moving the pieces around, seeing how they might come together. When he saw that they fit together as a story, he taped them together and sent them off.

The author of the letter to Colossians writes that in Jesus Christ, "all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). All of our lives are made up of scattered pieces, memories. Some of us are in an in-between place and time in life now that doesn't seem to make much sense. It doesn't seem that God is anywhere to be found. But sometimes, in retrospect, we look back on our lives, even times such as these, and we see how they fit together as a piece. How even a very difficult time has led to an unfolding, the breaking open of something new. When we see that, that is truly gift, truly grace,

As Harding reads about the pieces of George's life falling down around him, James turns around several times with an outstretched hand. I take his hand in mine.

When the lecture is over, James is the first to raise his hand. Harding calls on him. Slowly, carefully, James rises to his feet. Stands there. Just stands there. I am holding my breath. Holding all of the tension in the whole room. Worrying over what he's going to say, how this is going to go. Then very softly, James asks Harding what he thinks about relations between blacks and whites in America today. He continues to stand.

And then I witness something that all of you have seen as well. A meeting. What happens when you witness one person really meeting, encountering another person. So present, so real. It is what we see in Jesus in the Gospels and what others have seen that have called him the "Christ". And it is what, once in a while, we see right here and now among us.

Harding doesn't dismiss James, say that race relations have nothing to do with his book. Instead, he says that every writer today has to wrestle with the question and context of race. James asks what he thinks about today's race relations, can he comment on that. Once again, Harding is so present, responds, meets him right there, offers some brief response.

The next question. James sits.
I breathe.
James raises his hand again.

“James”, I say, placing my hand on his shoulder, “you have to let some of the others ask questions.”

“I’m not stupid you know!”

I know I have blown it. Pushed it too far. Here we are back to some old stuck place older than either of us and just as broken.

When the talk ends and applause dies down, James is the first one up to shake Harding’s hand, and then he is gone.

I stand in line to get a book signed for a friend, then step out of line to buy one more book.

The bookseller smiles, “Thanks for your intervention with that guy.” But I don’t feel good at all. I think all I have done is make things worse.

James is sitting alone on a bench outside.

“James it was really good to meet you”, I say, walking over to him, extending my hand. He looks up, extends his hand. And right then I know that we are alright. That whatever had cracked between us didn’t break.

“See you next time,” he says, grasping my hand one more time.

I wonder how I hold the world together and often in all the wrong ways.

Keep the pieces of my life and relationships in check by control and fear, holding back, not reaching out.

And then once again, there is this “incarnate” One, this Jesus, who again calls me out and thrusts me into relationship. Helps me see, in retrospect, what has been a meeting, a coming together.

In the novel Tinkers, at the very end of his life, George is visited again by a memory of his dad. One day, when George was married with children of his own, his dad drove up to his house, sat down for a few brief moments, the car idling outside, to ask about him and his sisters and brother, his mother. And then he is off. But something remains, the man that he thought had forgotten him, had never forgot. This memory, but something more than that, a present meeting with his Dad, is the last thing that George remembers before he dies.

Two men at a lecture, from opposite sides of the world, meet, look each other in the eye, grasp hands.

This God, made real and present in Jesus, calls us out, one more time.

Love has found us. Calls us forth.

Let us go forth to meet and to love.