

“Becoming Real”  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA  
Christmas Day – December 25, 2018  
John 1:1-14

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

I remember when I fell in love with this passage. It was my freshman year of college at Sewanee, and I was singing in the choir for Lessons and Carols. The final lesson of the service was this prologue from the Gospel of John. My acting professor climbed up the stairs to the lectern and in his deep, booming bass voice read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” To me, it sounded like the voice of God. I loved listening to him read it.

The powerful, poetic words reverberated through the chapel. It didn’t matter what it meant; the beauty of the words and the images were enough.

Hearing this passage is great for those of us who enjoy pondering theological mysteries like the nature of the Trinity and the Incarnation of God. It’s also great for those who enjoy the poetry.

But in day to day life, we don’t really want theological mysteries or transcendent poetry. We don’t want the Logos, the Word; we want something real, something we can touch. We want to be held, to be hugged, to know that we are loved. We want someone to tell us it’s going to be okay, to challenge us to be our best selves, and ultimately to forgive us when we get it wrong.

God became incarnate, Emmanuel with us, walking among us, eating and drinking with us, sharing our joys and our tears, our lives and our deaths. Jesus came among us and showed us in word and deed what it was like to have the kingdom of heaven draw near. God became real to us in a new way, not because God needed to become human, but because we needed God to become human. We needed to know that God was with us in real, concrete ways. We needed to see what it was like to love, to forgive, and to die to the old in order to be reborn to the new.

Now this may sound like a strange connection, but the past couple of weeks, I’ve been thinking about *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the story of the stuffed bunny who longs to become real. In brief, this velveteen rabbit is a present to a little boy one

Christmas. In the rush of opening all the presents, the boy plays with the rabbit briefly and then forgets about him, so he spends his days in the nursery with all the other toys, most of whom look down on him. All except one, the Skin Horse. The Skin Horse is kind to the Rabbit and answers his questions. He tells the Rabbit that being real is a thing that happens to you when “a child loves you for a long, long time.”

The Rabbit asks, “Does it hurt?”

The Skin Horse answers, “Sometimes. When you are Real, you don’t mind being hurt.” He goes on to explain that becoming real takes time, and that “by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

The Rabbit longs to be real, but he’s not so sure about the painful process it involves.

The rest of the story tells how the Rabbit indeed becomes Real, first to the boy and then, after a journey through scarlet fever and out to the rubbish heap, how he dies to his stuffed bunny self and becomes a real rabbit with flesh and blood, who can run and hop with the other rabbits.

I hope I’m not forcing a connection, but I’ve been wondering about this process of becoming real. We long for God to be real to us, and we long to be real ourselves. The spiritual journey is about dying to our false selves, our egos, and surrendering our lives to God. When God put on skin and became one of us, God became real to us in ways never before imagined.

Perhaps the Incarnation makes God real to us so that we can become real to ourselves. So that we can become the people God created us to be.

How many of us feel like we can be who we really are?

We put on masks in order to impress or to get others to like or to love us.

We pretend to be something we’re not because we’re scared that people might not love us for who we are.

We exhaust ourselves with our striving for perfection, not realizing that we are good and beautiful just the way we are.

Becoming real can be uncomfortable. It can make us feel vulnerable. It can hurt. It means letting go of our shiny, polished self in order to let our shabby, worn selves show.

It means dying to that which is not really us so that our true selves shine forth with a light that no darkness can overcome.

The theologian Frederick Buechner said,  
“What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year – in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may be born again in all of us.”

This world that is notorious for dashing all hopes is not an easy place. It's full of pain and violence. Today alone we grieve the loss of the people of Indonesia who were killed in the tsunami. We worry for those affected by the government shutdown. We ache for the refugees fleeing war and famine all over the world. We cry for our own hurts and losses and divisions.

And yet. And yet. The child was born that day. God did put on flesh and come among us. God is with us in the midst of it all. The darkness does not understand or overcome, no matter how much we may think that it does.

My friends, on this Christmas day, I pray that you will know the amazing, abundant, real-making love of God. That you will feel the light of Christ shining in your heart, clearing away the old and making room for the new. That you will hold onto hope even in the midst of hurt.

Merry Christmas! May Christ be born in you!