Sermon: “Word as Flesh”  
John 1:1-18

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

So I am a bit of a media freak, and I am a sucker for those heart-warming stories that come our way in the news, child or dog rescued from well stories. Did you hear or see the story about the mother giving birth in Colorado at Christmas, only to die, literally, then the doctors decide to save the child by Cesarean delivery, only to find the child also not breathing, then the child, miraculously comes to life, then the mother, miraculously comes back to life – and all are fine – with no apparent medical explanation? Did you hear that story? We love miracles at Christmas, whether on 42nd Street or Salt Fork Road.

There are several ways to consider the “real” miracle of Christmas. The most commonly read ones, of course, are the Nativity stories of Matthew and Luke’s gospels, a birth narrative that surely would have made CNN and Entertainment Tonight, if only anyone had noticed, or understood what was happening. But as far as the world then, very local, in Judea knew it was only another child birth, and certainly not to anyone famous or important, as far as they knew. I am not really sure the shepherds even really understood what was happening. Maybe the Magi did, but they came from afar, and were probably better tuned into such mysteries.

John, the fourth gospel writer, was the last to try and explain it to his specific audience in the Greco-Roman world. He took a different approach from the others. He ignored genealogies and birth narratives. He decided to start with a philosophical or theological explanation. He was probably writing to a more educated crowd, at least in Greek Mediterranean terms.

So John comes up with the language of “Word” or logos to explain what God was doing. It was not a new concept in Greek or Jewish thought, though, expressed a bit differently here than other Christian writers had tried. John goes back to “the beginning” of time or even before time, a human concept, to say that “the Word” or logos was already in existence with God. The Jewish writers used the concept of “wisdom” or Sophia in Hebrew as in Proverbs 1:20 “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.” John is taking a long held concept in Hebrew thought of God’s wisdom personified and giving it birth in “the Word made flesh” that lives among us human being and walks our streets. Now that is a miracle indeed. God choosing to walk among us down Stateline Road with all the needs, desires and experiences of any ordinary man or woman.

I want to stop here and explain that I am trying to do double duty here in this proclamation of the Gospel message. One of my roles as your minister of the Word and Sacrament, is to prepare newly elected officers of the Church, deacons and elders, to assume duties in the new year. So this morning I am also, as our tradition calls it, the teaching elder, teaching you and them about our Christian faith and its expression in the Scriptures and the accepted historical expressions affirming our faith known as the Creeds, the confessions, and the catechisms, collected and adopted as our Presbyterian Book of Confessions [Hold up copy]. It was a busy weekend, so I am killing two birds with one stone. At least the rest of you get to go home after worship, while the new officers have to stay and listen to me for another hour or two. Count your blessings.

John lays more emphasis on the divinity of Jesus than do any of the other Gospels. John is written later, probably in the 80s or 90s, than the others, with Mark maybe 10-20 years earlier. It is from John’s writing that we really gain understanding of what becomes a key Christian concept, “the incarnation,” God
becoming flesh in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, the literal and figurative, Son of God. It is one of the two great miracles of Christianity, the resurrection, being the other. The Church often prefers to refer to the incarnation as a 'mystery', because it involves knowledge of God that is too great to truly understand. How does God become flesh? Why does the Eternal deity become human to suffer?

John hints at it when he says “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”. Jesus is sent to be a light to his people, in fact, the Light of the World, a light shining in the darkness. John will pursue the reader from here in chapter one to chapter 3:16 where it will become clearer that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

God sent the Christ, part of God’s own self, that “the world might be saved through him.”

The Church Council of Nicea meeting in 325 A.D. would feel compelled to answer certain doubters and rifts that had come into the Church by then over the idea of the incarnation of Jesus. Was the Christ created similar to God, known as the Arian view, or was the Christ of the same “essence” as God. Salvation was in the balance said the bishops and debaters. Was Christ truly human or was he truly divine? And could he be both? The debate, which went on for another 30 years, came down to the use of the Greek word for essence or substance. Was Christ of the same substance as God or a similar substance? In Greek, the debate was over “homoousios” and “homoiousios”. The difference literally being over one Greek letter, the “iota” the smallest letter. And that dear friends, is why today, we still say, “it doesn’t matter one iota.” But to the Church leaders it did matter one iota. And so the side that won out has the Nicene Creed written as we have it and endorse its beliefs in the Presbyterian Church together with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and most other Christians, when we affirm:

“WE BELIEVE in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.” [There is more, we will read that together in a moment.]

It is important to know what we believe in as Christians, as Presbyterians. That is why I take this time to give you this study in Scripture and creed. I want to say one more thing. This is a Sunday that the Session has chosen to observe the Holy Sacrament of Communion, the Lord’s Supper. In the Lord’s Supper, we see the symbolism of Jesus offering his body and blood as a sacrifice for our salvation. It is also one of the Church’s mysteries. I think we come before God in the Lord’s Supper individually as well as communally. We come seeking different understandings too. Some need to remember the sacrifice of God symbolized by the elements of bread and cup. Others need to experience the mystery of the incarnation, the Word made flesh.
I found this hymn very suitable to the occasion written by Thomas Aquinas:

Now, my tongue, the mystery telling of the glorious Body sing,  
and the Blood, all price excelling, which the gentiles' Lord and King,  
in a Virgin's womb once dwelling, shed for this world's ransoming.  
Given for us, and condescending, to be born for us below,  
he, with men in converse blending, dwelt the seed of truth to sow,  
till he closed with wondrous ending his most patient life of woe.  
That last night, at supper lying, 'mid the twelve, his chosen band,  
Jesus, with the law complying, keeps the feast its rites demand;  
than, more precious food supplying, gives himself with his own hand.  
Word-made-flesh true bread he maketh by his word his Flesh to be;  
wine his Blood; which whoso taketh must from carnal thoughts be free;  
faith alone, though sight forsaketh, shows true hearts the mystery.

However you experience the Sacrament of Communion, please know that God chooses to communicate to you in that Holy moment something about God's great love for you, a love that could only be expressed by the sending of someone as close to God as a son, to live and die among us, that we might live in grace and truth, that we might walk in the light with God.

Alleluia! Amen.