

Title: God Gets Personal

Date: 12/25/2022 (Christmas Day, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 52:7-10](#); [Hebrews 1:1-4,\(5-12\)](#); [John 1:1-14](#); [Psalm 98](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/uaiY5cLDwKo?t=1214>

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isa 52:10).
Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.
With his right hand and his holy arm
has he won for himself the victory (Ps 98:1-2).
Amen.

If we ever start a Biblically themed gym at St. Alban's, these are some of the verses I would put on the wall. They help convey an important message:

God has incredible arms, and with God's help, so can you.

Imagining this makes me giggle and brings me such delight. No, I have NOT lost my mind, nor am I on a sugar high from Christmas treats.

These verses remind me of this year's Advent offering from Trinity Cathedral, Portland. It's a series of podcasts called Advent for Every Body. The Canon for Cathedral Life, the Rev. Shana McCauley, invited 28 people to reflect on the ways in which "human bodies have and continue to bear God in our world."¹ I keep trying to summarize their responses, but it's really hard. Each person shared a story that comes from living in this world in their particular body. Each story felt intensely personal.

In some ways, there is nothing more personal than our body. It feels easy for me to ask, "What are you thinking?" "How are you feeling?" or even "How's your soul?" But it's not often that I ask someone, "How's your body?"

Sure, if you sprained your ankle or broke your arm, I'll ask about that. If you're recovering from illness, I'll ask about that. It feels different to say, "Tell me what's going on in your body." "How is it with your body"? It's one thing if I was your doctor, but I'm your priest, so I'm not quite sure how to get across what I'm asking.

At my last church I facilitated Sacred Ground, which is described as "a film- and readings-based dialogue series on race, grounded in faith,"² I tried to ask people in the group about their body's reaction to the content, for there are things we know in our body before we can put words to them.

I wanted to know if there was a pit in their stomach or a sense of relief. I was curious if their body was telling them they were safe or if it was encouraging them to put up defenses. But they told me what they thought, what they were wrestling with; they couldn't tell me what they were feeling in their body. We're not used to talking about that, especially in church.

When I first encountered The Episcopal Church, I didn't know much about the difference between all the Christian denominations, not to mention what it means to be Episcopalian. When I asked, one person told me "Being Episcopalian means you don't have to check your brain at the door."

In case you're wondering, this is reason #7 in Robin William's Top Ten Reasons to be Episcopalian.³ Related to this, #1 is "No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you."

As you can see, asking questions and exercising our capacity to reason are big parts of our spiritual practice and spiritual identity.

This maps onto our understanding of what it means to be human based on the book of Genesis. In the first of the **two** creation stories it contains, we are told that God created humankind in the image of God.

Since no one had seen God, and since humans are made in God's likeness so that we can "rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground,"⁴ "image" has been used to denote a **quality** rather than physical appearance.

Perhaps being made in the image of God gives us the ability to reason, to acquire and exercise wisdom.

Perhaps the image of God is found in our compassion and care for people and living creatures that aren't us or related to us.

Perhaps being made in the image of God helps us develop a sense of interdependence. As humans, we are aware not just of ourselves but of our connection to everything and everyone around us, of our impact on the environment and our environment's impact on us.

Perhaps the image of God is in our ability to both be aware of the finiteness and impermanence of life **and** to have a time horizon that extends beyond the next moment and even our own lifetimes.

As I've spent time in the church, I've come to realize that being Episcopalian also means that we don't check our body at the door, either.

In the person of Jesus, we have AN image of the invisible God⁵. So often, we ascribe human qualities to God. We describe God as angry or jealous. That may say more about us than it says about God. So, God flipped the narrative on us. In the person of Jesus, God ascribed Godself to **us!**

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In early debates about the humanity and divinity of Christ, some people were horrified (horrified!) that God willingly made Godself vulnerable to everything we deal with as humans. It seems like they were afraid that God's transcendent divinity would be contaminated by our fleshly humanity. They got caught up in the metaphysical arguments about the mechanics of how God could become incarnate, could become flesh, and still be divine.

Jesus is a reminder that not only does our heart and mind and soul bear the image of God, our **body** bears the image of God. Jesus started in the same place we did, in the womb of a woman. The Incarnate Word had to be birthed and nursed and changed and bundled up.

The Incarnate Word got hungry the way we do, felt rejected the way we do, went apart from people to rest and pray the way we do. He got impatient with his mother the way we do and loved his friends the way we do.

In the person of Jesus, God got personal with us. Jesus knows what it is like to live in a human body, to move through the world in this body. He understands our temptations, our fears, our suffering, and our anxiety around death, because he has experienced all of this.

How many of you have heard of ChatGPT? A company called OpenAI trained artificial intelligence to engage in dialogue by feeding it unimaginable amounts of information. More books than any of us can read in a lifetime. According to their website, it will "answer followup questions, admit its mistakes, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests."⁶ Soon after this was made widely available, I saw on Facebook that a couple of people asked it to write a Christmas sermon.

I read a couple of them, and they were pretty decent. One person asked it to "write a Christmas Sermon based upon Luke's birth narrative, with quotations from Karl Barth, Martin Luther, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Barack Obama."⁷ In case you're wondering, no, this wasn't the sermon I preached last night. And I'll put a link to it in the text of this sermon so you can read it for yourself.

The sermon generated by AI sounds like it was written by a committee. The content is accurate. but it's missing something. It's missing the particularity of human experience, the specific experiences that you and I have. It's responding to the prompt but not really the answering the questions that are **really** on our minds and in our hearts.

All those years ago, God knew we needed more than words. Words are just words, invisible and without form, until they are embodied, until they are enfleshed.

So, the Word became flesh and lived among us. Jesus began where we began and grew up and lived a human life. Jesus exercised his reason when it came to interpreting his tradition and he asked questions of the religious and political authorities of his time.

Jesus came to address physical conditions such as poverty, captivity, disability, oppression, and illness and possession. He brought **more than words**; he fed, and healed and restored. Jesus laid down a path of love and human words and deeds that we could follow with our body.

We might go astray and turn away from God, we may lose sight of the image of God in our body and in the body of our neighbors,

but God has never forgotten.

The Word became flesh to remind us that we too are children of God. In this body, we both receive AND offer light and life. In this body, we receive AND offer grace and truth.

And yet, the Word became flesh to remind us that God is *always* speaking in and through our body,

when we feel light and when we are weighed down,
when we shine bright and when we are storm clouds,
when we struggle with offering or receiving grace,
when we have a hard time hearing the truth.

The way we feel in our body can help point us toward where to turn, who to talk to, which path to follow.

Whether Jesus the baby really slept through the night, whether the holy infant was really tender and mild, every Christmas we remember that through him

we have the peace that surpasses all understanding,
the peace we feel down to the depths of our body
that tells us we are home,
we belong,
and we are loved,

just as we are.

Merry Christmas!

¹ <https://trinitycathpdx.podbean.com/>

² <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sacred-ground/>

³ <https://christchurchepiscopal.org/new-to-the-episcopal-church/robin-williams-top-10/>

⁴ Gen 1:28

⁵ Col 1:15

⁶ <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/>

⁷ <https://mbird.com/science/technology/i-asked-a-i-to-write-my-christmas-sermon/>