

**“One Of Us”
John 1:14**

John 1:14 “So the Word became a human being and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness; and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son full of grace and truth.”

John says that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us." The sense of the Greek used here is that literally, God "pitched a tent" among us. God cared for us so much that God did not stay far away, could not stay far away, but came to be with us—to be one of us. The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The rock singer Joan Osborne, not one particularly known for her theological attentiveness, recorded a song a few years back called "One of us." In it, she asks, "What if God was one of us,
just a slob like one of us,
just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home."

An interesting question. The affirmation of Christmas is that indeed, God became one of us, and that God came not as one high and mighty and exalted, but as the song says, "A slob like one of us." A baby born in a smelly stable to unwed parents, born in poverty, born under oppression, born in an insignificant backwater country. The first Christmas was nothing if not scandalous, but we have domesticated it and prettied it up. We have lost a sense of the radical nature of the incarnation – of God pitching a tent among us, of the word becoming flesh.

This morning I would like to tell you a story that may help us with the idea of the word becoming flesh. It’s a true story, happened several years ago, and I hope that it will help us this morning as we think about what the birth of Jesus meant and what it means.

Bob Lamphere is a pastor out in Montana, in Billings. The remarkable thing about Bob is that for more than thirty years, he has had cancer, sometimes in remission, sometimes not. He attributes his amazing longevity despite cancer to friends and church members who have prayed for him faithfully. Bob’s case is so unusual that doctors have told him he’s in the medical history books, for which Bob is not exactly enthused. But his life really is a miracle.

But what I want to share with you this morning is not about Bob, it is a story that Bob told, something that happened to him a number of years back, in his first year as

pastor at the church in Billings. He was away for a conference when he received a phone call from the director of the Billings Food Bank, who told him that she had "volunteered" his services to conduct a funeral for an indigent person in Billings. As she broke the news to him, she said, "Bob, the Rider of the Rims has died."

To understand that title, you need to know a bit about Billings. The Yellowstone River runs right through town. In its geological history, this was once a powerful, tremendous river, and the result was a huge canyon, up to two miles wide in places. The city of Billings is actually in this canyon, though you might not realize it unless you went to the edge of town and looked up at these steep, high canyon walls.

The Rider of the Rims was basically what we would call a bum. He sometimes rented a room, sometimes lived in the streets of the "Skid Row" section of town. He hung out with broken down cowboys and old rodeo riders who had drunk too much and were spending their last days just trying to get by, trying to keep warm and mostly staying out of trouble.

This man was known as the Rider of the Rims because of something that he did one week each year. For fifty-one weeks he would appear to be a broken-down old cowboy, but for one week a year, during fair week, he would be almost miraculously transformed. He would have a wonderful horse, beautiful boots and spurs and a beautiful saddle trimmed in silver. Every evening during fair week, just before the rodeo began at sundown, he would ride the rim of the canyon above the fairgrounds. The PA announcer would direct the crowd's attention to the rims, and say "Here he is, folks, the Rider of the Rims." Everyone in attendance would see a larger than life silhouette of the American cowboy against the setting sun. It was an incredible sight. Every year, the Rider of the Rims would provide this wondrous sight on the bluffs above Billings. He was paid a small amount for his work, but he didn't do it for the money. He just wanted to provide people with this beautiful silhouette of the American cowboy.

At the end of fair week, the horse would disappear, the boots and spurs and saddle would be gone, and he would go back to the Skid Row section of town and resume his previous existence.

Eventually the Rider of the Rims died. And that's why Bob was called back. He didn't have a lot of time to prepare for the funeral, so he put together a couple of prayers and scripture readings and a short eulogy about how this man had inspired people each year during fair week as he rode the rims.

The next morning Bob went to the funeral home for the service. He didn't know what to expect and wondered who might come. He was a bit surprised to see some of the leading business people from downtown. And as you might guess, there were some of the broken-down cowboys, some with the bright red nose from years of heavy drinking.

And so Bob read the scriptures and said the prayers and gave his short eulogy. And then, kind of on the spur of the moment, he asked if anyone would like to say a few words. After a minute or two, a rough looking old guy got up and said, "He had the sweetest breath I've ever smelled!" Bob knew he had made a huge mistake. But the guy went on to say that the Rider of the Rims didn't use alcohol. Unlike so many people who lived in that area, he was not an alcoholic, and because of that, his breath was always fresh and clean. If he ran into the Rider of the Rims on the street and they shared a handshake and got close, he realized this man was different--he didn't smell of alcohol.

Bob was a bit hesitant now, but he asked if anyone else would like to speak. One of the business people got up and said, "Every morning he would go around to several of the business owners and whisper in our ear what he called the "word of the Day." It might be "peace," or a word like "patience" or "love" or "self-control." It would give us something to think about as we did our work, something to think about throughout the day."

Then an old rodeo rider stood and said, "One winter, my hands were so cold. I was living on the street and half-freezing to death. The Rider of the Rims heard about it, and he brought me a pair of leather gloves, lined in sheepskin. Those gloves kept me warm all winter and I still have them and wear them on cold days."

A woman rose to her feet and said, "I work at the Rescue Mission." Every time the Rider of the Rims came to a worship service, we would ask him to sing a hymn. He had the most beautiful voice I ever heard."

Another old cowboy stood up and said, "one winter I didn't have a good jacket. The Rider of the Rims brought me a nice, warm, down filled jacket."

And the testimonies of people who had been touched by the Rider of the Rims continued and continued. Every person there had something wonderful to say about the Rider of the Rims. And a picture began to emerge of an incredible man who cared for people, took care of others, lived among them as one of them, ate in soup kitchens, lived in a run-down little apartment, and was always with people, helping when he could, loving them, loved by them.

Finally, after everyone who wanted to share a story had done so, Bob explained that the committal was to be out in Eastern Montana. Then he gave the benediction and everyone left.

Bob walked into the funeral director's office, sat down at his desk, looked at the man, and said, "Tell me what just happened in there. What was I hearing?"

The funeral director said to Bob, "You know that the Rider of the Rims is going to be buried in eastern Montana. But what I've waited to tell you until now is this: the Rider of

the Rims owned a ranch in eastern Montana. Owned it till the day he died. But for some reason, he made a decision about 20 years ago to lease out his ranch--water, pastures, rangeland, horses, buildings, a nice ranch house. He made the decision to lease it all out, and he took the money he made from leasing and came to Billings. Over the years, he's used it to take care of broken down old cowboys, worn out rodeo riders, and the down and out of the city."

This is a true story. Can you imagine being this man? Wealthy, a beautiful ranch, land, horses...and can you imagine making the decision to give all of that up, to lease it to others, and to use the money as he did?

I don't know that I could do that. It's hard to understand why someone would do that, why anyone would do that.

And if I can't understand why, I certainly can't understand why Jesus would leave his home in heaven, give it up, come to earth to be born as a baby, to live for us and die for us and rise again for us.

"He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh, but of God. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

That is what Christmas means. God loves us so much that God sent Jesus, who gave up the glory of heaven to come to earth, be born of poor parents in a stable, and to be one with us. Jesus left the glory of heaven to share with us the glory of God. One of the titles for Jesus is Immanuel, which means God with us.

Christmas means that God is indeed with us. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." The joy of Christmas is the joy that God is with us. God was with us on that first Christmas morning, and God is with us even now. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift. His Son Jesus came to live among us, to live a sinless life, and then to die on the cross for our sins. Right before His death on the cross he met with His disciples at the passover meal, their last supper together, and began the Lord's table, the Communion celebration which we are going to do together this morning in celebration of the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins.

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