

July 12, 2020	The 6 <sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost	Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Lectionary 15, Year A	First Communion	Zoom Worship
Isaiah 55:10-13		Pastor Amanda L. Warner
Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23		

### Word Made Flesh

Today, we are celebrating First Communion. Once again, with our afternoon communion services and with our eucharistic ministry to those who are homebound by age, by sickness, or by the threat of Covid-19 we are a communing community of faith, and today, we get to celebrate with three young people, Genevieve, Madelyn, and Emma Kate, as they take their place at God's table of grace, the communion table, the welcome table.

This day has been a long time coming. Genevieve, Madelyn, and Emma Kate had their first "First Communion" class on March 7<sup>th</sup>. They were supposed to have their First Communion on April 26<sup>th</sup>. This moment has been delayed for them, for their families, for this community of faith, this moment when we take our places next to our young sisters in Christ and receive together the gifts of God for the people of God, the foretaste of the feast to come.

This will certainly be a memorable First Communion in the history of Emmanuel. I'm sure there are other places in the world where people have had their first Communions outside during a pandemic, but this is a first for this congregation.

But, regardless of how it's happening, the most important thing is that it is happening. As I mentioned before, this First Communion was supposed to happen on April 26<sup>th</sup>, which, in the liturgical year, was the third Sunday of Easter.

I try to schedule First Communion for the Third Sunday of Easter every year, because the gospel reading every year on the Third Sunday of Easter is a story about Jesus sharing a meal with his disciples. This year, that story would have been the story from Luke 24 about Jesus meeting two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus and being made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

I shared that story with the girls during their final First Communion class last night. We walked the sidewalks around the courtyard and the church, wearing masks and pretending that we were the road to Emmaus, that Jesus was the unrecognized stranger among us, that we invited him in for a meal because it was evening and it was growing dark, and that in that meal, in the breaking of the bread, Jesus was made known to us. We saw Jesus and knew him for who he is, the promise keeper, the one who promised that he would be with us in the breaking of the bread, the one who had said, “This is my body, this is my blood.”

What a perfect story for a First Communion Sunday.

Of course, we all know what happened. Coronavirus happened. Lock down happened. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, we were all still locked up tight in our homes, the possibility of gathering together still a distant and hazy hope.

In May I started to make a plan, for what Communion in our new, changed context might look like. I shared it with the Norwood public health director. I shared it with the Bishop. They both gave me their approval to proceed. I shared it with the church council. They, too, approved the plan. Then it was time to talk with the First Communion families. Obviously, we couldn't plan for First Communion until we were a communing community again.

The First Communion families were on board with trying this new thing, so, a plan was made and a date was set. July 12<sup>th</sup>. Today.

After having chosen the Third Sunday of Easter for First Communion, because of the gospel reading on that day, I didn't even look at the readings for this day until long after it had been chosen for First Communion.

And when I did, what did I discover? That the readings, particularly the first reading and the gospel reading are focused on the word.

And in so many ways, that's okay, because this has been a time when the power of the word, the power of God's word has been made manifest in our lives and our world.

Back on March 13<sup>th</sup>, when the decision was made to close our building's doors for an unknown amount of time, I had no idea what we were going to do. How we would survive as a congregation if we couldn't meet together, couldn't gather together to sing, to commune, to share each other's stories over coffee in Kask Hall? How would we survive if kids couldn't play in the nursery, if Bible stories couldn't be shared in Sunday School, if Confirmation class and youth group couldn't meet in person, to keep praying together, keep learning together, keep laughing together, keep praying the Lord's prayer together, with elbows up?

I really wondered if our congregation could survive an unused building and a time of separation.

But then, not in a day, or a week, or even a month, but slowly, as time dragged on, I began to see the miracle unfold. I began to see how the word, how God's word, came to get us and rescued us. In a time of crisis, the word has come to meet us and it has been for us just what we have needed. It has given us ways to speak our lament, it has given us tools to express our fear,

it has given us the cries of the Psalmists, given us the shattered hopes of disciples, who still didn't know about the resurrection.

It has told us stories of the ways that Jesus found people in their loneliness, and gave them companionship. It has told us how Jesus' resurrection brought new hope, new dreams, new energy to people and communities that found that they could have a mission and a ministry that reached far beyond the boundaries that they thought existed because of religion, because of race, because of class, or gender.

The word has been with us to teach us and to inspire us, to challenge us and convict us, to give us strength and hope, to help us to know that God is at work in the world and to remind us that we are called to be a part of God's work in the world.

And that word, God's word, during this time when our building has been closed, has gone forth in ways that I could never have imagined. And just as Jesus said, in the parable of the sower, which is the gospel reading for today, the seed of the word has been sown in ways I would never have expected.

And rather than this time being a church killing and ministry destroying time of stagnation, instead, because of the power of the word going forth, it has been a time of growth. New friends have been joining us for worship every week. Our youth group remains strong. Our Confirmation class is still meeting and still praying. Young children in our congregation are meeting with me and each other and their Sunday School teachers for a weekly story time. We have a weekly prayer group that is building community, as we sustain each other with fellowship, and find strength and hope in the word.

We have new resources going up every week on our website and Facebook page, worship services and sermons, and pictures, and slideshows, and, not to the surprise of our digital ministry team, but perhaps to my surprise, people, are actually watching them, strangers and friends are watching them. Members of Emmanuel are showing them to their friends and using them as ways to encourage them, to comfort them, and to invite them into fellowship with us, for a day, or for a lifetime.

If I ever needed to be convinced, if I needed to be persuaded about the power of the word, I don't anymore. I have seen it, with my own eyes. I have seen God's word, in a time that I feared would be one of collapse and crisis, be scattered in unexpected ways; ways forced by crisis, and it has landed on fertile ground.

I have seen these words of the prophet Isaiah affirmed in this time, in this experience. Thus says the Lord:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

I have seen this to be true, and I am grateful.

But, Jesus, Jesus came into a world of words, into a faith of words,

into a community gathered around the word, and Jesus brought more.

For the people of Jesus' time, for his parents and grandparents, for his ancestors in faith, there were so many words. There were generations of words.

Words of the ancestors; stories about a God in the night, a God in the fire, a God who called, a God who challenged, a God who judged, a God who loved, a God who forgave, a God who set free, and a God who binds with law. There were stories about a God who protects, a God who guides, a God who feeds in the wilderness. There were stories about a God who chooses a family, who chooses a nation, for the blessing of the whole world. There were so many stories passed down, father to son, mother to daughter, told around campfires, told in times of crisis, told in times of celebration.

There were so many words. Words of the judges and the kings, words of choosing, words of anointing, words of rejection. There were stories about battles, stories about victories, stories about mistakes, stories about children betraying their fathers and about kings betraying their oaths. There were stories about obedience, and far too many stories of people going their own ways. There were more stories about a God who judges and more stories about a God who forgives. There were so many stories, told in official court records, told the night before a battle, told in worship, told in times of failure and told in times of victory.

There were so many words. Words of prophets who spoke of God's judgment, God's wrath, God's forgiveness, God's hope. There were so many words, words of praise, words of love, words of lament, words of Psalmists, words of poetry, words of wisdom.

There was story after story and there were words upon words upon words, mountains of words, valleys filled with words; words that questioned, words that celebrated, words that contradicted other, words that created heroes and then tore them down, words that celebrated strangers, words that saved enemies and words that destroyed them.

Jesus came from a tradition of words. Jesus came from a community of stories. They were the tapestry of the religion that he was born into, the religion he practiced every day of his life.

By Jesus' time the words, the stories had been written down and boys were taught to read the ancient language, different from the language that they spoke, so that they could keep telling the stories, stories that told them who God was and who they were.

But still, in spite of all those words, in spite of all those stories and also because of them, Jesus came, and Jesus was called the word made flesh. He was a living story, the living story of God's grace, God's mercy, God's love.

The living story that told us what all of the stories were supposed to tell us, that God was Emmanuel, God with us. God with us in the breath that fills our lungs. God with us in the holiness of the earth we walk. God with us in the love that swells our hearts. God with in the passion for justice that burns in us. God with us in our joy. God with us in our grief.

The stories had been told over and over and over again, stories that said that God was with us, but still people doubted and questioned, and wondered where God was. Still people took advantage of other people, and hated those who were different from them, and used the perceived absence of God to trample on the poor and to stifle compassion.

And so, Jesus, the living story, came to walk with them. To tell them new stories, but also to live those stories out for them in people healed, in the dead brought to life, in storms stilled, and in bread blessed and broken, in thousands fed, with plenty left over.

And when the world decided that it had had enough of God with us, decided that it had had enough of this Jesus who was Emmanuel, decided that it had had enough of this Living Word, this Word made flesh; when the powers that be decided that a God who would not bend to their will was a God who could not be tolerated, when they decided to kill him, Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed gave his disciples and all who would come after them, a new story, a story that was more than a story.

He took bread and he gave thanks and he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat, this is my body, given for you.” Later, he did the same with the cup, he took it and he gave thanks and then he gave it to his disciples, for them to drink, telling them, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.”

He gave them more words, new words, but he also gave them something physical, his presence in bread and wine. He gave them his presence so that they could tell the story of that night, but so that they could also see him, and touch him and even taste his presence with them, long after he had ascended into heaven. And to this day, as Jesus promised, we get to experience his presence with us in the breaking of the bread.

Today we get to celebrate all of the ways that the word comes to us.

We celebrate that when God’s word is cast into the world, even in ways that we hadn’t planned for, even in ways that might seem strange or complicated or less than ideal, it bears fruit. It does not return empty.



And, today, we celebrate that for the first, but certainly not the last time, Genevieve and Madelyn and Emma Kate, get to experience the presence of the Word made flesh, the presence of Jesus in Holy Communion. A word we can touch. The presence of Emmanuel in bread and wine. God with them. God with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.