

God as One of Us  
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When I was growing up, there was a popular song that played all the time called "One of Us." Joan Osborne sang it and asked questions throughout, "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? If God had a face, what would it look like? If God had a name, what would it be?"[1] Some found the song a bit sacrilegious or troublesome. I will say that it's been stuck in my head for days and that can certainly be annoying! Though others found that these questions, whether lyrics in a pop song or not, are good ones. In some form or another, haven't we been asking them for a long time, especially in Christianity? What if God was actually one of us?

To help answer Joan Osborne's questions, we can certainly look to our scripture this morning, the Prologue to the Gospel of John, though it's also helpful to consider modern takes. There's a terrific book of poems called *God got a dog*. To explain the poems found within, author Cynthia Rylant writes, "It's hard to be God. You have to, well, be GOD. But you also get to be God. Which means you have quite a perspective on things--a perspective that no one else has. No one. So there you are, looking out at the world and everything in it, and one day you just might want to see what it's like to be a part of it all, and since you're God, you can do that. And so . . . you do."[2]

What follows are beautiful, funny poems reflecting on everyday experiences through God's eyes (as imagined by Rylant, of course.) God is depicted as male and female, young and old, and various races in the illustrations. So God woke up, got in a boat, went to the doctor, got arrested, took a bath, caught a cold, got cable, went to India, and got a dog among other deeply human experiences.

One of my favorites is "God went to beauty school." In it, God decides to open up a shop called "Nails by Jim" because God figures that if God calls it "Nails by God" people might think that God was using God's own name in vain. We read, "He got into nails, of course, because He'd always loved hands--hands were some of the best things He'd ever done and this way He could just hold one in His and admire those delicate bones just above the knuckles, delicate as birds' wings, and after He'd done that awhile, He could paint all the nails any color He wanted, then say, 'Beautiful,' and mean it."[3]

I love this image of God opening up a nail salon because he just loves hands and painting nails and admiring his beautiful work throughout the process. You see, sometimes it helps to bring the messages of our faith home by hearing our stories in modern terms. And it helps to imagine God as one of us not just by exploring scripture or even classic theological arguments of the Incarnation, but by simply picturing God as a human being. How would God view our world and things we experience all the time?

Today *The Message* translates John 1 verse 14 like this, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish."[4] This translation of God moving into the neighborhood to verbalize the complicated concept of the divine, preexistent Logos and the Incarnation is wonderful if you ask me. That's what John is trying to say after all—that somehow God came to hang out with us and experience humanity first hand in the person of Jesus Christ. Pastor Frank Thomas says that for him the beauty of this text is that Jesus moves into every neighborhood, writing "from barrio street corners to Gold Coast condos, from ghetto projects to suburban mansions, from the streets of South Central to the

affluence of Palm Springs, from war-torn Africa to the extravagance of Dubai. The Word, Jesus, dwells with us all, in all our neighborhoods.”[5]

God doesn't pick and chose who God comes to. At this moment, as John describes it, God comes to us all, in all our neighborhoods. And that's a moving concept of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. So how do we possibly make sense of this?

To get into the theology a bit, there's this concept called Kenosis or self-emptying. It's the idea that God's power and knowledge became limited and finite in Jesus. God emptied part of God's own self out of love for humanity and all creation. Kenosis Christology is based on Philippians 2:6, that Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”[6]

That's how this concept of Kenosis developed, what we translate in English as self-emptying is really about God moving into the neighborhood in the person of Jesus and even Jesus himself performing acts of self-sacrificial love. Jesus goes to the cross out of his love for humanity and because of his teachings and the way he often challenged the system. There is no divine aloofness and invulnerability in Jesus' story or in our stories or even in God's story.[7] In Jesus, God was and is one of us. That's the whole point of Christmas after all and what John is trying to say to us today, that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.”[8]

Theologian Brian Hebblethwaite outlines the historical and theological problem of the Incarnation by saying that, "Critical study of the New Testament suggests that Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher, prophet, and healer whose sense of the presence of God and the love of God for the poor and outcast was so powerful that the movement it sparked not only survived his cruel death but enabled a community of faith to grow and flourish, one in which Jesus himself was spoken of in more and more exalted ways. . . . But this process can be interpreted either as an increasingly fantastic product of the religious imagination or as deepening insight into the identity of Jesus Christ." [9] So you see, it's complicated—we have to ask ourselves how Jesus' earliest followers saw him and how that may have changed over time and why it changed and how we see him today. Joan Osborne was really onto something —what if God was one of us? If we say that somehow God was one of us, then why does it matter?

In the end, here's part of what I think we can get out of the Prologue to the Gospel of John that can inspire our faith today. We see in this Incarnational view that the problem of evil and suffering can be easier to bear. To quote the great theologian Alfred North Whitehead, "God is the fellow sufferer who understands." [10] If we say that God really was one of us, it means that God gets suffering and can be with us profoundly in those moments. Additionally, Christians can use the Incarnation for ethical purposes. When you think about it, this concept that the Word became flesh and lived among us means that the body is not bad or sinful, but good and redeemed. God didn't deign to dwell with us, God delighted to dwell with us, as us. Humanity has inherent worth and dignity and the way we treat each other matters. This also means that this earth that we call home is good and holy and caring for creation matters. Hebblethwaite affirms that “Christian involvement in the thoroughly earthly problems and needs of their fellow human beings is patterned on the divine 'kenosis' in the Incarnation.” [11]

So we have a duty to care about ourselves, one another, our communities, and our world because we see just how deeply God loves us when the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. That's what this Christmas Season is really all about. And personally, I'm holding onto that image of God opening up a nail salon as just another one of us. So God could delight in our hands, so “He could just hold one in His and admire those delicate bones just above the knuckles, delicate as birds' wings, and after He'd done that

awhile, He could paint all the nails any color He wanted, then say, 'Beautiful,' and mean it." [12]  
Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] Joan Osborne, "One of Us."

[2] Cynthia Rylant and Marla Frazee, God got a dog.

[3] "God went to beauty school," in Cynthia Rylant and Marla Frazee, God got a dog.

[4] John 1:14, The Message.

[5] Frank A. Thomas, "Pastoral Perspective of John 1:(1-9) 10-18" in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1, 190, 192.

[6] Philippians 2:6, NRSV.

[7] Brian Hebblethwaite, "Incarnation" in Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, Eds., New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology, 258.

[8] John 1:14, NRSV.

[9] Hebblethwaite, "Incarnation" in Musser & Price, Eds., New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology, 257-258.

[10] Alfred North Whitehead as quoted by Brian Hebblethwaite, "Incarnation" in Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, Eds., New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology, 259.

[11] Hebblethwaite, "Incarnation" in Musser & Price, Eds., New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology, 259.

[12] "God went to beauty school," in Cynthia Rylant and Marla Frazee, God got a dog.