

Sunday, January 2, 2010: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:(1-9), 10-18

by [David Dragseth](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue

On the first morning of every new year, I take a three-foot-long saw with three-inch teeth, walk out onto Lake Michigan at 20 below in my sandals and swimsuit, hack a hole in the two-foot-thick ice and jump in.

This is called a "baptismal pre-dunk."

I then shut myself up in a small room at 220 degrees until my skin is singed red. I run out and jump in the hole again. I repeat the process one more time. A trinity.

My high school youth group also revels in the ritual and is responsible for the liturgical names of the various dunks. The youth call the second dunk "incarnation" and the final dunk "Lutheran rising." I am delighted by their theological ingenuity.

I understand "baptismal pre-dunk," and "Lutheran rising" sounds Viking and sadistically cool. But I was intrigued by the teens' choice of "incarnation" for the second dunk. One night, near the fireplace in the cabin, I grilled a veteran leader. Here's her response: "Pastor, think about it. It's minus 20 outside. It's an ice hole in a frozen lake in the middle of January in Wisconsin. All thinking drives down to one thought and one thought only; I am flesh and my flesh is freezing. And do you know what? That sauna afterward feels like salvation."

Irenaeus would be proud. *Caro cardo salutis*. The flesh is the key to salvation.

We are creatures of flesh. We are weak, we are vulnerable, we are messy, and we must be shocked with a reminder if we are to understand the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

Irenaeus loved to throw cold water on his Mediterranean colleagues. *Sarx*, you are *sarx*; *caro*, you are *caro*. Flesh. You can't get around the flesh. You can't get around

mortality. You can't race off to a spiritual life if you want to understand God in the incarnation. The spiritual is for incarnation, not the other way around. God did not come into the world to condemn it, but in order that it might be saved through him. God chose the world. Why do we have such a hard time doing the same?

We'll all remember that Irenaeus, schooled well by Polycarp and by John before him, was in a keen fight with the Gnostics of his time. The world is corrupt, they said. The world is fundamentally broken, they said. The world must be escaped, it must be overcome in order to find God.

But in John's Gospel, Irenaeus was taught to find God in the sensual. In John, God washed feet, smelled extravagant perfume, made abundant wine, had his guts churned in weeping, raised a putrid Lazarus, asked a friend to stick a hand in his wounded side and ate grilled fish on the lakeshore.

Irenaeus knew well that John was the most sensual, worldly Gospel of them all. Every Maundy Thursday, as I wash hundreds of feet in fulfillment of Jesus' command in John's 13th chapter, I see his point, or at least I smell it.

But splash as Irenaeus may, I'm not sure his cold water has shocked to flesh many of us in the contemporary church. John is not known as the sensual Gospel, but rather as the scholarly, intellectual, heady Gospel. John's Jesus is not fleshy man but unmoved mover. John's words are not social justice but scholarly discourse. It is easy, when reading John, to be transfixed in the beginning with the word and to forget to follow John all the way to the flesh and the living. Caught in theology, most of us get lost, unable to take our socks off on Maundy Thursday, let alone plunge into the freezing water of January.

I used to be frustrated with Johannine theology. The convoluted logic, the head-spinning discourses, the contradictory sentence structure made my head ache. But the more years I spend as pastor walking with the broken, fleshy reality of myself, my family, my congregation and my world, the more rigorous a theology I need. In love and friendship and betrayal, in crucifixion and resurrection, our guts churn and we yearn for the spiritual artistry to make sense of it. John seems up for the task.

The flesh is the key to salvation, but the temptation to run away is great. Theologies of escapism abound, and it takes a scholar and a theologian and most of all a loving God to keep us in the flesh.

The other day I engaged one of those most fleshy of church experiences—I had my annual personnel review. In a room with fluorescent lights and stale coffee, I sat with friends of many years, friends whose bodies I've held in the hospital, whose foreheads I've blessed in baptism, whose hearts I've helped mend through grief. We sat and talked about my successes and failures, in great detail, for two hours.

Most of the time I wanted to scream louder than I do when jumping into the lake. But that is the flesh. It freezes away the inflated, idealized, even heroic self. That is the flesh; Jesus' commandment not to love some idealized stranger (whether ditched Samaritan or cheek-slapping enemy) but to love one another, the people around us, in friendship, in community. The flesh is the key to salvation because the flesh is not sentiment. It is hot and cold reality—the reality that God rises in salvation, whether in Wisconsin or the entire cosmos.