

Flesh made word

By [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

December 29, 2008

"The Gospel doesn't just contain ideas worth remembering," says Henri Nouwen in [Reaching Out](#).

"It is a message responding to our condition." He goes on to add that Christian doctrines "are not alien formulations to which we must adhere, but documentations of the most profound human experiences, transcending time and place, handed over from generation to generation as light for the darkness."

The fourth evangelist begins with doctrine, with profound human experience: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. . . and we beheld his glory." The eternal one became temporal, the infinite finite. The maker of all places and times moved into one time and place. In Jesus, the almighty embraced human weakness—and died violently.

But death is not the last word: as at both birth and resurrection, the creation's deep darkness is scattered by God's light. Because "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," a particular moment in time and place becomes the "fullness of time."

The story of Jesus takes on eternal import and abiding significance. But to what end?

Sometimes

I have to remind myself and those I serve of where we are in the story, the great and continuing narrative of God's way with the world. It is easy to forget, of course. Most of us have heard (and perhaps preached) way too many sermons presenting the gospel as preparation for tomorrow, a cozy retirement plan or catastrophic fire insurance. And we have read too much devotional literature teaching that our greatest challenge as disciples is getting more of Jesus into our busy lives.

The

gospel, however, is more a way of living than a way of dying. And the goal of discipleship is not to get more of Jesus into "my life" but to get more of me into Jesus' life. The purpose of prayer is not to invite Jesus into our work but to answer Jesus' call to *his*.

And

so the challenge is to remember what Jesus' work is, and how we have been summoned into it. With apologies to N.T. Wright, I find my bearings by rehearsing the biblical story in five sentences:

- God created the world and everything in and around it, and it was very good.
- Something went way out of whack—"awful bad wrong," as my grandmother used to say—and soon the world and its people languished under the weight of disobedience and indifference.
- God chose Abraham and Sarah's family and sent the law, the prophets and the priests and kings of Israel as a means of healing and peace for the broken world.
- In the fullness of time, God sent Jesus, the word made flesh, to heal the world in a way the law and its representatives could not.
- Jesus called us—his first disciples and all disciples since—to be the flesh of his word, the body of Christ, a piece of the continuing incarnation of God's healing and saving work.

This is who we are, where we

are in the story. God was in Christ, and Christ is in us; God sent Jesus, and Jesus sends us. The word became flesh so that our flesh might become God's word—the bearer and best evidence of God's compassion, offered through us to a broken and lonely world.