

Christmas Day

As my mother neared the end of her life five years ago, she passed through some stages of dementia. All six of her children believed she recognized us whenever we walked into her room at the nursing home, but I noticed she had stopped calling me by name. So whenever I walked in, I announced, “Mom, it’s Paul!” just to help her out. Other people are not so fortunate. The person in their family with dementia may not recognize them at all and even mistake a spouse of many years for an intruding stranger. This is emotionally painful even when you know the person does remember you; they just can’t recognize you.

The Prologue of John’s Gospel says of Jesus, “He was in the world... but the world did not know him.” He was God’s Word, the one through whom the world came to be. But many people had spiritual dementia: they did not recognize God right in front of them. The same can happen to any of us.

The Prologue of John’s Gospel meditates on the Word. It presents God at the beginning of time discontent with just being God and deciding instead to create and communicate. The Word was with God, John says, and indeed the Word was God. God’s communication expresses who God is, just as our communication expresses who we are, whether in writing, electronic media or in person. When we communicate, we use words to represent us. We are flesh that becomes words, but God’s Word became flesh. God’s entire way of communicating with us is Jesus. Today we celebrate the day Jesus first dwelled among us as the Word made flesh.

This same passage introduces John the Baptist, sent from God for testimony, so that others may recognize the Word and believe in him. John was sent by God to be a number two, yet he showed no jealousy toward number one. John was content with his role, the witness to the Word made flesh. Many of us would not be so content; we would probably want attention. Obviously, even God wanted attention. But John could see in Jesus the talent, the spirit, and his own source of salvation. John wanted us to recognize Jesus too.

As we near the end of this difficult year, we may not recognize the Word made flesh dwelling among us even now. The pandemic can create spiritual dementia—just as ancient Israel failed to recognize God and abandoned the covenant. They suffered wars, watched the destruction of their city, lost their homes, went into exile, and lived through generations of unfulfilled prophecies.

But God’s blessings are never far away. We can overcome our spiritual dementia if we recall them. Sheltering at home, we have discovered God dwells there with our families and in our solitude. We found new ways to communicate with others, and for God to communicate with us. We took care of neighbors in need, and they shared their faith with us. We have abstained from large community activities, but we have seen that where two or three are gathered together, there is Christ in their midst. We have grieved the loss of people we loved, but drawn closer to the mystery of death and resurrection.

In a sense, the pandemic has put us all in a memory care unit. Christmas is like having the Son of God walk into our room and say, “Hey, it’s me!” The Word of God dwells right here, among us, today.