Sunday, January 5, 1992
HOW GOD UNDERSTANDS
John 1:1-5,9-14

“In the beginning was the Word... All things were made through Him... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us!” To me, these are some of the most beautiful and revealing words in the Bible.

The writer of John’s Gospel is retelling the story of creation first told in the Book of Genesis with one addition. Here’s my translation:

“In the beginning was the active, creative, self-expression of God, what we call the Love of God, the Divine Energy. All of creation has come into being, and creation is still going on as a result of this loving, creative energy of God. At one point in human history, this Loving Divine Creative Energy, which we call God, became a human being and lived among us in Jesus of Nazareth. We celebrate this birth every Christmas.”

As we begin this New Year of 1992, let’s consider again what all this means for us.

First, the Love of God becoming a human being reminds us that creation, the world, everything that exists is created and affirmed by God and is therefore good.
We need this reminder because there are always those among us who want to emphasize the sinfulness of the world, who separate the material from the spiritual, or the flesh from the spirit, and imply that what is physical is somehow evil and that only what is spiritual is good.

We know now, because of modern physics, that any separation between the physical and the spiritual, or what physics calls matter and energy, is false. For purposes of conversation and understanding, we sometimes try to make a distinction, but there is no separation. All matter is energy.

To put it another way, God’s Loving Energy becoming a human being in Jesus of Nazareth is God’s approving “yes” to the world of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows God’s handiwork.” Our physical existence, including our human bodies, is created by God as good.

We make a mockery of the goodness of God’s creation when we try to divorce matter from energy, or the physical from the spiritual, or soul from body. God made all of creation good.

Secondly, because the loving, creative energy of God became a complete human being in Jesus of Nazareth, we now have a new understanding and knowledge of God, and God has a new understanding of us and our situation.
Let’s use the example of water (H_2O) as an analogy. If we experience water only as steam or water vapor, then we have only experienced it in a partial way. To know H_2O in its fullest, we need also to experience it as a liquid and a solid, that is, in a more “physical form.” The same is true of getting to know another human being. If I experience another person only in a spiritual way by hearing their voice on a telephone, reading their thoughts in a letter or book, or having someone else tell me about that person, then I only know a little about that individual. But if I see that individual, shake their hand, give and receive a hug, and if we have a meal together and visit in each other’s homes, then I have a more complete understanding of that person and have experienced that individual to a small degree, at least in a physical way.

So when we say the creative, loving energy of God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, this means we have a new understanding, knowledge, and experience of God.

The opposite is also true. Because the creative, loving energy of God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, God now has a new understanding of each one of us and what our life is like in this world. We all know that having a common experience is what draws human beings closer together in human understanding.

I still remember the first time I was called on to minister to a bereaved person. I had only recently graduated from seminary and was serving my first church. I got a call that a man in the church had died. As I sat in their home talking with the man's wife of 45 years, I did my best to give her some comfort. While I was there, a friend of hers came to visit, an older woman. She came up and quietly embraced the new widow and said simply, "Mildred, I know what you're feeling. I've been there myself." I could see a bond of closeness forming between them. It turned out the other woman had lost her husband about a year earlier, and the fact that these two women knew first-hand what grief was, did something for their relationship that I could not do.

There is nothing that can compare with having had the same experience to open up vistas of understanding between people. The coming of God in the person of Jesus tells us that God understands us and our problems more deeply because of that. Because God chose to come and live among us as a human being, God has moved out of remoteness and into closeness with our situation. There is nothing in our experience where God cannot say, "I know what you are feeling; I've been there."

Following the Second World War, a German Lutheran minister named Guenter Rutenborn wrote a play entitled "The Sign of Jonah." This minister lived with many of his people through the terrible experience of the rise and fall of the Third Reich, and the awful destruction that came to Europe through the Second World War. The play attempts to deal with the issue of God's involvement in all this agony.

The play begins with a group of displaced persons milling around the stage trying somehow to determine who was to blame for the events of the last five years. All the traditional scapegoats are identified: Hitler, the Jewish people, the munitions manufacturers, and even the "average person" and their indifference to the flow of events.

Suddenly a man gets up out of the audience and walks upon the stage and says, "All this discussion is superficial. Do you want to know who is really responsible for what we have experienced? I'll tell you. God is responsible! Isn't God the one who began this whole miserable experiment of creation? Didn't God turn over awesome powers to the control of human beings? Didn't God allow all this potency to be misused? The real culprit is an irresponsible Creator, one who does not care about what happens to people."

The people on the stage are stunned at first by the man's accusations, but slowly they warm to the idea and decide to stage a trial of God on the charge of irresponsibility. Then the stage turns into a courtroom with a judge, a jury, witnesses, and all, and in no time flat, God is found guilty of not caring about creation. The judge says angrily, "The nature of this crime is so great that the punishment must be an ultimate one. I hereby sentence God to the worst of all possible fates — God must come and live in this miserable world as a creature."

The three archangels, Gabriel, Michael, and Rafael, are given the responsibility of carrying out the sentence of the court. As the angel Gabriel walks to the end of the stage, he turns around and says, “I’m going to see to it, when God serves this sentence, that God knows what it’s like to experience obscurity and shame. He’ll be born in a cave on the backside of nowhere, with a peasant girl for his mother who was not married when she became pregnant. There will be suspicion of shame about his origins. He’ll grow up in a Jew-hating world.”

The second angel, Michael, when he starts off the stage, turns and says to the audience, “I’m going to see to it that when God serves the sentence, God knows what it is to experience frustration and insecurity. As a man, he will undertake a task that is greater than his ability to complete. No one will understand him, not even his own family. His closest friends will turn away from him in the end. He will know rejection and insecurity. He will wind up with no place even to lay his head.”

The third angel, Rafael, as he starts off the stage, turns and says, “I’m going to see to it that when God serves the sentence, God knows what it is like to experience pain and death. God will be falsely accused at the end — tried, spat upon, abused, and God will die the slow, torturous death of a common criminal.”

The three angels disappear, and the house lights go down, and as you sit there in the darkness and silence, all of a sudden it hits you. God has already served that sentence. God knows what it is like to live as a human being in this kind of world. What this means, of course, is that God understands from first-hand experience what we humans are up against. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

Thirdly, not only did the Love of God become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, but the Love of God is also in us. It is there, although we do not always acknowledge that love or act on it. However, when we allow that Love of God to take over, miracles happen. Greed disappears, and our lives begin to become more harmonious.
This Love of God also becomes flesh in the world when a child is cherished and nurtured, when the homeless are cared for, and when anyone is rescued from despair. This Love of God becomes flesh when any person is encouraged to feel that their human worth does not depend on financial success or personal fame. What a gift! What a grace! What a miracle! Amen.