

---

## *Ugly Flesh on Christmas Day*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Christmas Eve – Year B**

I grew up on a farm, where there were lots of barns and cattle, maybe more cattle than there were people. When I was around five years old, I can remember one of my first real responsibilities was counting cows. My father would take me with him, and we would ride out over the pastures and fields, making sure all the cows were accounted for. Maybe we were just like that old Emperor Augustus: we had to make sure everybody was counted. We had to have 32 in this pasture, 28 in another pasture, and so forth.

We often had to ride on the public roads to get to the fields, and one of the most important things my father did, as he passed someone on the road, was to raise a slight wave, lift his hand up in greeting. Most of the time, in fact, we knew who we were passing on the road. That wave was an important greeting.

But even if we didn't know who it was, the slight greeting was important. It was an acknowledgment of the other. "Hail, O favored One! The Lord is with you." This etiquette remains with me. Even now, whenever I drive in the country, I tend to make a slight wave, through the window, to whomever passes. Mind you, I don't always do this in the city. The city somehow demands an altogether different social behavior.

Well, a few years ago, I was driving through rural Georgia again, and it was actually on a Christmas morning. I passed three or four cars. Then, a particular truck passed, and I lifted my hand in greeting. Suddenly, a startling thought flashed through my head! Unfortunately, this revelation was not like the sudden, glorious appearance of an angel to the shepherds. No, this was a terribly embarrassing thought. It was an awful and dreadful thought that passed through my head.

The driver was a woman whom I had never seen before. But before I could help myself, even in the loving beauty of that Christmas morning, I thought to myself: "Why, that may be the ugliest woman I've ever seen!"

Indeed, she was. I mean, I appreciate beauty as much as the next person, but this woman was downright ugly. I had waved to her, a friendly enough habit, but then shuddered to myself: that woman is ugly!

Instantly, oh my, I was so ashamed! I was incredibly embarrassed by that horrible and ugly thought.

But I also knew, in another instant, what God thought of her. That woman is what Christmas is all about.

Because, nowhere in the gospels does it say that God took on only beautiful flesh, or only perfect flesh. The gospels say only that God became flesh – beautiful *and* ugly, perfect *and* imperfect.

Consider that rustic setting of our familiar Christmas event. The story of two thousand years ago is fairly rudimentary and crude, not ugly perhaps, but certainly less than extravagant. It is an ordinary couple, on their way to be counted by a foreign government, who have a baby rather unexpectedly, and who lay that baby in a manger because there is no room in the inn. Their situation is common and ordinary, lowly and even helpless.

Such is the way that our mighty and transcendent God chooses to be among us. And it's a good thing that God doesn't wait

for us to become beautiful before he chooses to live inside us. There is, in each of us, a measure of ugliness as well as a measure of beauty. We know, as we decorate our homes, businesses, churches with elegance and sparkle—we know—that humanity is not all glitter and wonder.

When I look into the mirror each day, I can see as much ugliness as I imagined I saw in that woman in the truck, especially if the lighting is florescent. I see myself, my cracks and wrinkles, and I wonder as I wander: Did God come all this way to save this?

That woman in the truck, I imagine, considered the same thing of me as I considered of her: “That is the ugliest man I have ever seen! Who is that ugly man?”

Well, we are both people whom God chooses to save in Jesus Christ. We are both the perfect examples of imperfect flesh and blood. God saves that flesh by becoming that flesh, even when it is still ugly.

Joan Osborne sang about it like this:

*What if God was one of us?  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Tryin' to make his way home?*

That is exactly what we are celebrating tonight. God did not become someone who lived two thousand years ago. God becomes one of us today. And God gets into the most unpleasant and uncomfortable and weak and ugly places of our lives the most powerfully. In those places where we are most ashamed or embarrassed, is where God lives first.

God gets into our ugly tonight! God touches us. But, here’s the miracle. Nothing in this world is ugly after God touches it. After God touches us, we are not ugly. In fact, the only parts of our lives that are ugly, *the only parts of our lives that are ugly*, are the parts that we have not allowed God to touch.

Our best offering tonight, then, will be our imperfection. Our best offering is the open acknowledgment of ourselves, in whatever shape or circumstance or ugliness we are in. The great mystery of Christmas is that God honors all humanity, the good, bad, and the ugly—and God honors all parts of each of us—the good, the bad, and the ugly—when he deigns to become human in Jesus Christ.

Hey, I hear somebody singing! I hear my old hero, Leonard Cohen, singing tonight. He sings about it this way:

*Ring the bells that still can ring.  
Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack, a crack in everything.  
That’s how the light gets in.*

There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.

There is a glorious light shining from this Cathedral parish tonight. It shines in our music, in our worship, in our prayer, in our very gathering. It is the same light that shone around the shepherds, a light so awesome that it terrified them while it also announced the birth of a savior. It is the same light that guided kings to the savior. There is a glorious light that shines all over the world on this night.

But it gets into us through the cracks. Through a young child born in a crude manger. Through the common and ordinary mistakes of our lives, even through our ugly and embarrassing thoughts. The Light of Christ enters the world through wrinkles and wounds.

With God, the wrinkled and messy skin of a newborn child is just like the wrinkled and wounded skin of an old man. They are both the places where light gets. And where light grows.

You may be acutely aware of wrinkles and cracks in your own life this evening. Things have not gone right. Perfect plans have been cracked. All the glittering hotels are full. Beautiful lives have been marred. I suggest to you that those cracks are

not accidents. There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.

That light wants to enter every living being tonight. Our God is counting tonight, too, just like the Emperor Augustus; our God is waving, too, to every living person, the good, the bad, and even the ugly. God is looking for the lost and the ordinary. God is looking for the cracks, those places in each of us, where he might pour that light. God is looking for weak and wrinkled flesh, even ugly flesh, that he will turn into beauty.

One Christmas, the light came into my life through an ordinary person in a truck. I have never seen her again, but I remember her today as being exceptionally beautiful. I realized the truth through her that day: We are made beautiful by those who touch our ugliness. We become beautiful when God becomes one of us.

Tonight, the Christ is born in the cracks and wrinkles of our lives. God becomes flesh—all flesh—and God becomes beautiful—in us.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, Georgia

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*