

**“Far From Home”**  
**John 1:1-15**  
**Columbia Theological Seminary Baccalaureate Service**  
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**Miriam**

I never thought of the first chapter of John as a migration story until I came to Agua Prieta here on the US/Mexico border—far from my home on the Mexico/Guatemala border.

I was 18 years old and studying to be a teacher when my dad called me. He was in Agua Prieta 2000 miles away from our home trying to provide for our family because he could no longer provide for us farming.

He told me to come north to work in the factories to help support my younger siblings. . . .I resisted saying that I had a dream, but when my dad said “your sister and brothers need to eat . . .what about their dreams?”, I knew I would not be graduating.

I left the lush green landscape of my home in Chiapas filled with mangoes and bananas, rivers and trees and traveled to the dusty brown desert border-town of Agua Prieta, Sonora.

John starts his gospel with some sophisticated theological arguments—

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . “

John’s cosmic and theologically complex language seemed far from my reality and I really did not see how it connected with my life.

And then saying “the light shining in the darkness, the true light that gives light to every human”...we were living a dark time and I wandered where that light was.

At first glance, these verses seemed more like some type of philosophical exercise that people of wealth and privilege had the time to discuss in ivory towers.

And then we get to John 1:14:

El Verbo se hizo carne y habito entre nosotros. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

“God did what?”

John are you saying that the Divine Creator left His Heaven because all the world was not right? Are you saying that the Supreme Being loved us so much that He decided to interfere in our lives? Are you saying that the God of the Universe cared enough about us nothings that He would humble himself, leave Heaven that plushiest of all gated communities and live among us?

God did what?

“The Word, who is God, became flesh and dwelt among us.”

## **Mark**

This verse has been the linchpin of the Christian understanding of the incarnation since the early church fathers such as Irenaeus and others worked out the classical doctrine over 1800 years ago. Yet, it is foolishness to the wise.

I learned the classical doctrine of the incarnation well in my theology classes in seminary. In my missiology classes in seminary and in mission orientation in preparation to become a PCUSA Mission Co-worker, I received a tremendous amount of information about the importance of incarnational ministry—of mission that is intentional and deeply relational. But my greatest education about the reality of the incarnation, an education that has led to an ongoing transformation, did not occur until I sat on an old five gallon bucket on a dirt floor on the outskirts of Agua Prieta.

After my graduation from Columbia in 1998, responding to God’s call in my life to serve with Presbyterian Bi-national Border Ministry, I left my family in South Carolina, got in my little Saturn, and began a long journey to the border.

After 2100 miles, I arrived to the Frontera de Cristo office in Douglas, Arizona where my colleague Pastor Chuy Gallegos Blanco was waiting for me. I wasn’t in the office for more than 5 minutes when Pastor Chuy said to me: “Vamonos”. I climbed in Pastor Chuy’s road worn Bronco and we headed south toward Agua Prieta.

As Chuy maneuvered through the pot-hole infested streets of Agua Prieta, he told me that we were going to the home of a some members of the church who host a weekly Bible study in their newly constructed home for their neighbors.

After about 15 minutes, we crossed the highway that had been the southern boundary of Agua Prieta navigated the road as it went through a couple of twenty foot ditches and finally turned left onto another scraped patch of desert that served as a road and finally pulled up to a small gray cinder block house that a family from the church had just built and moved into.

Hermano Pedro and Hermana Flor, members of the Lily of the Valley Church, warmly invited me into their brand new home for an evening that would shape much of my subsequent ministry. Almost immediately after moving in, they invited all their neighbors into their home to join them for Bible Study. Electricity and indoor plumbing had not yet arrived in their home. The floors were still dirt and there was no ceiling, only a tin roof.

In the intimacy of the family's sitting room, which also doubled as their bedroom and dining room, about fifteen of us gathered to read Scripture and listen for the Word of God to us. As it turned out, none of us were from Agua Prieta, and everyone except Pastor Chuy was from as far away as I was. They were from Chiapas, the southern-most state of Mexico that borders Guatemala.

What I was to learn while sitting on that 5 that five gallon bucket was that the brothers and sisters had left their land of Chiapas because of economic and political reasons. And all felt the reality of what one brother shared, "Salir de nuestra tierra es sufrir. To leave our land is to suffer."

The Scripture was John 1. To be honest, I was thinking "why in the world are we studying this gospel in this place? The most theologically complex of the gospels in a space where only two of us had more than an elementary school education. In fact, our host had only learned to read after he became a Christian as an adult, in order to be able to read the Scriptures.

I had spent three years of master's level study and wasn't really too sure how Hermano Chuy was going to bring this text down to the level of the folks in the room. I was just glad that it was Chuy's task not mine.

As the Scripture was read, the Holy Spirit began to move among us in a mysterious and palpable way. After the Scripture was read, what amazed me was that Chuy did not explain anything he just asked the question: What did you hear in the reading of God's Word?

Hermano Pedro said "lo que me llamo la atención es : "El Verbo se hizo carne y habito entre nosotros. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ."

"God left 'his land' to live among us."

"Yes," responded a sister, "God knows what it means to be far from home."

"God is not distant from us. God knows us. God knows our suffering and knows our joys," added Hermano Pedro. "God is not some distant judge who is out to get us. God has come to be in relationship with us-- to know us and so that we can know God."

God was not in her heaven anymore. God crossed the divine/human border to know us so that we can know God. God has come to know us not as some distant Supreme Creator, but to know us fully and to love us fully, so that we can know God more fully and love God and one another more fully.

Right there in the midst of that humble dwelling while sitting on that less than comfortable five gallon bucket, the reality of the incarnation became more real to me than ever before in my life. I was far from home, I missed home; everyone in that humble and sacred space was far from home . . . even Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

In the classrooms on the beautifully manicured campus of Columbia Seminary and in the comfortable sanctuary of my youth I had gotten it right intellectually; but it was in that circle with the dust caked on my shoes beside a man name Pedro who testified to the true light that I saw more fully the “glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

### **Miriam**

God didn't have to leave home; God did not have to leave the celestial mangoes and rivers behind; but God chose to do so—for you and for me. God's love is so great for us that God left the comfort of home to dwell with us in the messiness of our lives.

God entered into the sufferings and joys of this world. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son . . .

I must admit that this incarnation business seems foolish to me. If I were almighty God, I believe I would have worked out the redemption of the world in a very different way. Instead of entering into the messy-ness and the muck, into the pain and poverty, into the hate and rejection of the world fully, I believe I would just fix the problems of my creation with a snap of my fingers from my heavenly situation room.

### **Mark**

Just think of it in human terms:

Isn't it a lot easier to get on the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Web-site or text the Red Cross and make a donation to tornado relief to help build and rebuild structures for people whose houses and hopes were violently blown away than to dwell among persons whose homes and hopes have been blown away by the demons of addiction, mental illness and economic hardship right here in our own communities?

Isn't easier for us to pay for a hotel room for the stranger who we are called to welcome or send money or food to an organization who provides housing and food for the asylum seekers and refugees that God commands us to love than to actually provide Christian hospitality by inviting people into our own homes?

Isn't easier to go on a short term mission trip to Mexico or Haiti and receive the hospitality of the church and community there, than to truly open up the doors to our churches, homes and lives to the folks from other countries who are new in our communities?

Isn't a lot easier to denounce the sin of persons we do not even know and create hashtags, rather than entering into relationship with them and sharing the love of Jesus Christ?

## **Miriam**

Jesus calls you and me to follow him into the joys and sufferings of the world-- not just to visit for a week, or stop in every once in a while—but rather to dwell fully in the midst of a hurting world, to share the good news of God with the Samaritan woman and the drug pusher, the undocumented and the addicted, the goth and the jock, the straight and the gay, the rich and the poor, the conservative and the liberal . . .

to dwell with them to know them more fully and to love them more fully in the way of Jesus so that the glory of God can shine forth more brightly in our lives and in their lives and joining together can fill up this world with divine splendor. . .

to share in the reality that Jesus crossed the Divine/human border to make it known that we are all fully known and fully loved and invite all to embrace that amazing truth.

The incarnation of God involved grave dangers. In becoming flesh and dwelling among us and crossing the divine/human border, God risked death for our sakes and for the sake of the whole creation. Throughout his ministry, the leaders of the day plotted and tried to entrap Jesus so they could send him back across the border where they thought he would not challenge their assumptions of the world. Following Jesus, the Divine Border Crosser is not comfortable or convenient, following Jesus is risky business, but in doing so we encounter abundant life.

## **Mark**

We are celebrating your graduation in a challenging time:

brown and black lives are not valued the same as white lives not just manifest in the reality of vigilante in-justice that snuffs out the lives of persons like Ahmaud Arbery; but also in the economic and health inequities that the current pandemic makes easier to see;

the world is increasingly divided—just 30 short years ago we were hailing the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1989 only 11 walls existed dividing nations and researchers were talking of a borderless world and now there are 65 walls—including a double-layered one built during the Obama administration just two blocks north of where we are sitting right now;

yes, the evils of racism and xenophobia continue to infect the life of our governmental institutions and our community life, our churches and our seminaries,

You are in good company ending this important part of your formation for ministry facing really bad news:

When Jesus finished his intensive seminary education also known as his forty days of temptation in the desert, he was confronted with the news that John was in prison facing the death penalty.

Confronted with that very bad news, Jesus went into Galilee and began proclaiming the good news: “The time has come, the kin-dom of God is at hand. Repent and trust the good news.”

Jesus moved far from home and became flesh not just to enter fully into the sufferings and brokenness of the world, and definitely not to be a purveyor of bad news... but rather to put flesh on the good news of God’s redeeming love.

Your time has come, this part of your faith journey is over; the kin-dom of God is as at hand, go forth and trust, live into and put flesh on good news of God.