

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## **The God who opts in**

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” These ancient words from John’s Gospel open a mystery so profound that we could spend lifetimes plumbing its depths. But notice what happens next in this cosmic prologue: this Word, this Logos, this Divine Wisdom present at creation itself, does something utterly unexpected. The Word becomes flesh.

This is not a distant deity issuing commands from above. Nor is this a remote power manipulating the world as if it were a chessboard. Rather, this is a God who opts into the complexities of creaturely existence. God chooses to participate in the sweat and tears, the hunger and thirst, the joy and suffering that define embodied life. God assumes human form.

And how does God choose to be recognized in this world? Not through domination. Not through overwhelming displays of force. Not through the machinery of empire. Instead, God chooses to be known by dwelling among us in likeness. God becomes one of us to show us who God truly is.

Today we explore this radical contrast: a God who becomes vulnerable flesh to seek relationship with us, and an Empire that treats flesh, real people, real bodies, sovereign nations, as disposable property in the service of power.

A compelling way to describe the Incarnation is to see God as the ultimate transitioner. Consider the implications of this perspective. God assumes what some Black and Queer theologians refer to as “marginalized flesh,” thereby dismantling the binary between divinity and humanity. God demonstrates that the sacred and the creaturely are not irreconcilable opposites. Instead, God bridges, unites, and embodies both.

God transitions across a boundary previously considered impassable. In doing so, God reveals truth in unexpected places: within the margins, among the vulnerable, and in the very flesh that society may overlook or reject.

This theme of power in the margins runs throughout Scripture. Listen to the prophet Jeremiah's vision of the procession of the redeemed returning to Zion: "See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here."

Who leads this procession? Not warriors. Not the powerful. Not the elite. The blind and the lame. Expectant mothers and women in labor. These are the ones at the front of God's parade. This is power formed in vulnerability. This is a divine reversal of every empire's logic.

At this point, the contrast becomes pronounced: Empire fears vulnerability, demanding dominance and control. Empire categorizes individuals as either useful or expendable. In contrast, the power of Christ manifests as a force of love that fosters transformation, affirms the worth of every person, and recognizes divinity in those whom society despises.

And make no mistake: when the Word becomes flesh, God takes sides. God opts in to the world from below, not from the palaces of power. Jesus is born in a stable, not a palace. He is raised as a refugee fleeing state violence. He ministers among the poor, the sick, and the marginalized. Christ draws near to the oppressed and vulnerable. This is not an accident of the Incarnation; it is its very purpose.

Let's return to John's Gospel: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

This is the great tragedy of the Incarnation. God shows up in flesh and blood, walking among us, and we fail to recognize the divine presence. We reject the one who comes offering relationship. We trade profound relationality for power, control, and the illusion of security.

Once this exchange occurs, we construct structures to maintain it. Policies, institutions, and systems are established to preserve power at the expense of others.

People cease to be seen as kin and are instead regarded as threats, resources, or mere transactions.

We see this same sin of non-recognition playing out right now, and we must name it clearly: The United States government has kidnapped Nicolás Maduro, the president of the sovereign nation of Venezuela.

It is essential to state unequivocally what this action represents: it constitutes an act of aggression and a violation of international law. This exemplifies the most unrefined form of imperial logic: the belief that the United States possesses the right to intervene in another nation and seize its head of state when that leader does not serve American interests.

Regardless of one's perspective on President Maduro's policies, this extrajudicial seizure is indefensible. It reflects the persistent colonial logic that has afflicted Latin America for centuries: the belief that the sovereignty of nations with predominantly Black and Brown populations is conditional, negotiable, and subject to the approval of North American power. This logic asserts that elections are invalid if their outcomes are unfavorable, borders are disregarded at will, and leaders can be forcibly removed due to military superiority.

And here is what we must understand as Christians: When the Word becomes flesh and dwells among the oppressed, Christ stands in solidarity with the poor of Venezuela. Not with empire. Not with the kidnappers. Christ stands with the Venezuelan people who have suffered under decades of US sanctions, sanctions that have devastated their economy, caused shortages of food and medicine, and contributed to a humanitarian crisis that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

The United States cannot claim innocence in this context. For years, it has engaged in economic warfare against Venezuela, punishing the entire population for electing leaders who challenged American hegemony in the region. When diplomatic and economic measures failed to achieve the desired regime change, the response escalated to abduction.

This is characteristic of imperial behavior: it imposes a harsh, unyielding scrutiny that eliminates nuance, context, and relationship. Under such scrutiny, acts of violence are reframed as justice, extraction is justified as necessity, and the sovereignty and humanity of others become negotiable.

But this is not the light of Christ. This is not the light that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This is the harsh floodlight of the interrogation room. This is the spotlight of the imperial stage, where other nations are treated as props in America's story rather than as people with their own agency and dignity.

Beloved community, the truth that empire seeks to obscure is this: all humanity is interconnected. We share a common origin in the remnants of stars, are composed of the same elements, breathe the same air, and depend upon a shared, fragile ecosystem. We are kin.

The people of Venezuela are our kin. The mothers who cannot find medicine for their children because of US sanctions are our sisters. The workers struggling to feed their families in an economy strangled by American financial warfare are our brothers. Christ stands with them, because Christ always stands with those crushed under the wheels of empire.

The Letter to the Ephesians speaks of our inheritance as children of God. We have been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." We have been chosen, adopted, and redeemed. But this chosenness does not require the sacrifice of others. It is not an inheritance built on the ransom of nations. It is not a blessing that demands someone else be cursed.

American exceptionalism is heresy. The belief that God has uniquely blessed the United States and given us the right to dominate other nations is idolatry. It is the worship of our own power, dressed up in religious language.

God's abundance is not a zero-sum game. God's love is not scarce. God's kinship extends to all flesh, including Venezuelan flesh the US empire treats as expendable.

What are the implications for us? We are called to engage in what may be termed structural repentance. This involves critically examining and reforming both the internal and societal systems that perpetuate the belief that certain individuals are unworthy, that the sovereignty of some nations is illegitimate, and that some lives are expendable.

Specifically, it means we must repent of American empire. We must acknowledge our complicity in a system that kidnaps presidents, starves civilian populations

through sanctions, and treats Latin American sovereignty as a suggestion rather than a right.

This undertaking is challenging. It necessitates a critical examination of our participation in systems of extraction rather than care. It compels us to confront difficult questions: In what ways does our community practice solidarity with the people of Venezuela, who are targeted by our government? How can we oppose sanctions that amount to collective punishment? How do we resist actions that undermine international law, such as this abduction? How do we challenge the imperial logic that privileges American lives over Venezuelan lives?

These are not rhetorical questions. They demand concrete answers, embodied actions, and real solidarity. They require us to say clearly: This kidnapping is wrong. The sanctions are wrong. The decades of intervention and destabilization are wrong. We stand with the oppressed because that is where Christ stands.

Jesus tells us that whatever we do to the least of these, we do to him. This means we are called to meet Christ everywhere, especially in the despised, the unassuming, and those the world tries to erase.

We serve a God revealed not through uniform illumination that obscures complexity, but through the interplay of light and shadow, in contrasts that disclose depth and truth. God is encountered in vulnerable flesh, at the margins, and in places overlooked by empire.

In the face of illegal seizures and imperial overreach, we hold to something deeper: the Creation song that echoes in our very bones. It's a song of collective flourishing, of justice for the marginalized, of a kinship that cannot be kidnapped, extracted, or disappeared.

This is the song the Word sang when it became flesh. This is the song Mary sang when she proclaimed that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." This is the song the early church sang when they held all things in common and ensured no one was in need. It's the song we're called to sing now.

So go forth with openness to every Divine encounter. Look for Christ in faces that the empire tells you to ignore. Recognize that each body is a dwelling place of God,

including those the world tries to make disappear. Remember that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and that the same Word calls us into profound relationality with all flesh.

May you see the God who opts in everywhere you look. May you resist the logic of extraction and embrace the way of solidarity. And may you sing the Creation song with your whole life until the whole world joins in the chorus. Amen.