
What Is This Flesh?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Christmas Eve

Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps!

It used to be that boots were the first things that we put on in the morning. Now, we don't boot ourselves. We boot up our computers. In fact, the phrase "booting up" our computer actually refers to this older bootstraps phrase. Computers start by loading a small amount of computer code, which is then used to load larger and more complex amounts of code until the machine is full up and ready to use.

Our computers have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. Can our bodies do the same?

What is this flesh around us tonight?

Have you noticed? What is it that you have seen this year across billboards, splashed across magazine covers, dancing through television commercials and programs?

It is flesh.

Two thousand years from now, an archaeologist digging into our past, finding photocopies and digital codes, computers and exercise machines, might be amazed to find such devotion to the body, such fascination with flesh.

I admit my own fascination. I enjoy the huge and hulking football players careening into each other on Fall weekends. I enjoy the beautiful figure of the human form as much as anyone.

But there are times when I must ask, "Is this all there is?" There are times, times like tonight, when all of us must ask, "Is this flesh all there is?"

We lap up dish after dish and then worry about diets. We work out "religiously" We eagerly consume the latest drugs, one drug to ease this, another drug to prolong that. Look at the enormous sums we spend "" on beauty, on exercise, on the glorification of the body, and still more on the anxiety of the body. This body is something that worries us.

Are we the right size? Are we the right color? Do we have enough leisure? How can I save effort and strain on this body?

What is this flesh, this flesh all around us tonight? We will claim tonight, that God has become flesh. We will sing that God has become this stuff around us.

Some of us might argue that the flesh is all there is. Walt Whitman could proclaim majestically that "All flesh is miracle." "

I believe," he said, "*in the flesh and the appetites*."

*Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each
part and tag of me is a miracle."*

But others of us know that the miracle of mere flesh comes to an end one day. Robert Graves, the poet, once described Ulysses, the universal traveler, whose journey towards home has come to represent the human journey. In Graves' depiction, the futility of the flesh comes to Ulysses:

*One, two and many: flesh had made him blind,
Flesh had one pleasure only in the act,
Flesh set one purpose only in the mind""""
Triumph of flesh and afterwards to find*

Yes, the futility of the flesh means that flesh can never satisfy its own desires. Try it. It is literally impossible for a person to truly pull oneself up with one's own bootstraps. We can pull the boot onto our foot, but we cannot actually pull our whole body up. We need Someone from above.

Flesh can never satisfy its own desires. All travelers toward home realize this after a while.

We are like Ulysses, sailing toward home, forever and ever, sailing toward home, hoping for healing and seeking salvation. We are like Joseph and Mary, riding towards home, forced beyond our will sometimes, but believing that once we are at home, something wonderful and miraculous will occur.

Will the miracle be flesh? After all, "all flesh is miracle."

No, the miracle is more than flesh. Into the world two thousand years ago, a strange man was born. In Bethlehem, he did not enter the world with great expectation and exalted pedigree. It was obvious when he became an adult that he was certainly flesh. He cared for flesh. He touched flesh. He healed flesh.

But he was also something else. This Jesus was flesh, this Jesus was human; but he was also Spirit. This Spirit-filled Jesus was deeper and stronger and more wonderful than flesh. Because this Jesus was stronger than flesh, then this Jesus could redeem flesh.

And we human beings certainly need redemption. Our sin is to think, generation after generation, that this flesh is all there is. The needs and the cravings of the flesh tempt us, over and over again, to believe that this is the only reason for existence. We become obsessed with things physical, with sex, with flesh for its own sake.

But the flesh never reaches salvation on its own. Flesh cannot save flesh. The more we try, the more we fail.

Instead, flesh is meant to be filled with grace, with Spirit, with truth. Flesh is meant to be the body of care and love.

Yes, this is the great paradox. Flesh is not all we are, but flesh is what we are. We are created for more than flesh, but flesh is also the way we live out our salvation.

What, then, is redeemed flesh? What is flesh when we have been filled by grace?

Well, with grace, flesh is the way we truly love. With grace, flesh is the way we truly care. With grace, flesh is the way we truly build.

Therefore, flesh is not simply for sex; flesh is for love. Flesh is not simply for worry; flesh is for compassionate care. Flesh is not simply for exhibition and obsession; flesh is for assistance and strength for the other.

We celebrate a miracle tonight. Our bodies have been redeemed.

Yes, these old things we wear around. Some of us wear them like an arrogant goat, full of pride and boastfulness. Some of

us wear them like a tattered and fraying suit. Some of us wear these bodies in embarrassment and shame.

But whatever way we wear these bodies, whatever way we wear this flesh, God redeems us tonight with grace. We are here tonight to celebrate grace in the flesh. There is a gift that surpasses everything under our trees and under the stars this night. It surpasses everything else that is being offered in the world. It is the gift of grace - God's love has become real.

God's love has become flesh. Look around you. It is here.

It is here in the friend you have brought to Church. It is here in the one you sit beside at home, watching television. It is here in the folks who care for the sick, and feed the hungry, and house the homeless. The redeemed flesh is a smile at a lonely child. It is a hug between estranged lovers. It is a hand hammering nails into a new house. It is feet delivering meals to the hungry. God's love, in the flesh, is here in those who teach our children, those who uphold order in our cities, those who respond to the ordinary emergencies of community. It is God's love in the flesh.

Yes, we are in the flesh. But we are not saved simply by being in the flesh. The body, even the body electric, cannot save itself.

Someone from outside ourselves has to save us. We cannot save ourselves.

No, we cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. But we can pull ourselves up with the swaddling cloths of Jesus. Those swaddling cloths were strips of cloth meant to protect flesh, in the cradle and in the grave. Jesus wore them at both times of his life.

This shall be a sign for you, the angel said. You shall find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. It is a sign for us today, too. We are cared for, like a child. We need salvation from above, from the spirit.

And God has cared. God has smiled upon the world this night with the fresh spirit of a child. God has become one of us, in the flesh, for the salvation of the world.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip