

*Awestruck*  
John 1:14 (from *The Message*)

Do you know the word *ineffable*? It's the kind of word that my eyes would usually scan over when I read it in a book. I think I have some idea of what it means, but I'm not quite sure, and I don't want to stop long enough to find a dictionary. Finally I looked it up. *Ineffable*: It means something that can't be expressed in words. Something with so much beyond-you-ness, or transcendence, that it's indescribable. That's ineffable.

Spiritual experiences often feel ineffable. Something stirs inside of us and leaves us without words. Do you know that feeling? You are moved—to tears, or gratitude, maybe even to action—by a piece of music or a stunning sunset, or an act of kindness that pierces all the way through your defenses. You get an insight that suddenly makes perfect sense. A moment when you are absolutely sure that you are in the presence of something astonishing, maybe even sacred, as clearly as you know anything in your life. But when you try to describe that moment to someone else, you just can't find words for what just happened.

It makes us feel tongue-tied, inarticulate. But that experience of words being inadequate isn't a failure; it's the sign of an experience that's beyond words. It even happened to John Wesley, who had enough words inside of him to start the whole Methodist movement. Once, years after he was ordained as a priest, Wesley had a moment when he felt God's presence so surely that it changed his life entirely. From that moment on, he stopped doubting his faith the way he'd done his whole life up till then. But when he tried to describe that experience, all he could say was, "I felt my heart strangely warmed."

It can happen in other contexts too. Have you ever tried to describe why you love your child, or your spouse? I remember a moment—one moment—in my life when I was so moved by love for someone that I couldn't find one more way to say it. I'd used up all the words I had for love; nothing quite captured what I felt. Finally: "I am you," I said. That's not true literally, of course. We're never completely the same as another person, no matter how much we love them. It wouldn't even be healthy to think that way. I know that. I knew it then. But I had no other words to express what I was feeling. And when I remember that moment, now decades ago, I can still remember how I felt, how it feels to love someone that much.

An ineffable experience is what John was trying to describe in the first chapter of his story about Jesus. Like Mark, and unlike Matthew and Luke, John tells no story of Jesus' birth. There's no manger, or angels. No adoring shepherds, or wise men from the East. John knew those stories, but for him, the details of how or when or where Jesus came to be here weren't so important. What was critical to John, what he wanted us to understand before we know anything else about Jesus, is that because Jesus was here, everything—everything—is different. Nothing is the same as it was before.

In the first chapter of his gospel, John is saying, ‘I can’t really explain it. But it’s as if I wasn’t even alive until I knew him. As if nothing was alive until he came.’ Listen to how John starts his story. ‘The Word’ is John’s word for Jesus.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Do you understand what all those words mean? I don’t. But this is what I think John was saying: Everything is different now. It’s as if real life—life that makes sense—has just begun. It’s like the whole story of creation has to be told again, from the very beginning.

You can get a little twisted up if you try to analyze John’s words as if they come from a textbook. They’re beautiful, but they’re fuzzy, too big and abstract to help us connect much, unless we’re feeling the same thing ourselves. He’s trying to describe something *ineffable*.

And then, while he’s writing something more like poetry than prose, John gets to one sentence that crosses over into something concrete, something we can get our arms around.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us...*

Or in the words that Eugene Peterson wrote after he went back and studied John’s original Greek text:

*The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood.*

When Jesus came, John says, God took up residence with regular human beings. “Moved into the neighborhood.” Bought the house next door and unpacked his boxes. This is why metaphors are helpful, isn’t it? It’s the only way we can *almost* understand what John felt and was trying to say: that the God who is powerful enough to create Everything chose—chooses—to leave the safety and comfort of his palace in some distant corner of the universe, to come live here, next door. To you. Not to appear just long enough to make some announcement or to clean things up. To live.

The story of Christmas is the astounding story that God is not *out there*. God is right here. People saw him, *felt his power*, in the Jesus who, oddly, found spiritual material in tiny seeds and sparrows and salt; who immersed himself in the life story of a woman he asked for a drink of water. Who stopped to spend more time than necessary with a blind man begging on the street; who paid a lot of attention to someone whose mental illness was so bad that all they could think of to do with him was chain him up so he wouldn’t hurt himself; who stopped his work to listen to a woman who just needed to complain that all the doctors she’d been going to for twelve years still couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her. Who was graceful and generous all the way through a pretty ugly death.

And if that's true, John is saying, then God lives in your neighborhood too. Maybe not in someone named Jesus, but in people who are trying to be like him. I think that's us. It's our lives—the words that come out of our mouths, and the way we use our money, and every time you're more compassionate than strictly necessary—that carry the presence of God into the neighborhoods of our lives. Into kitchens, and garages, your kids' messy bedroom. Into that side area where the garbage cans go, and you hope no one else ever walks through there. Into the life of that annoying guy who still has political signs in his front yard. Into the parts of the city you mostly avoid.

I've been reading a delightful book called *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*, written by a woman named Shannan Martin. I recommend it to you. She and her family moved from a leafy suburb like this one into a gritty urban community, where she had to learn how to be a neighbor to a whole bunch of people she'd spent most of her life avoiding. "Everything we accomplish is pointless if we cannot be known as people who love freely and fully," she says. In our heads we know this. In our hearts we want it. But we seldom take the actual step of getting outside of our church and our homes to do something about it, to actually expose our hearts and our schedules to something other than our own plans. "Maintaining a safe distance asks nothing of us," this author wrote. "Living entangled" is what it means to love like a neighbor.

Living entangled. We know what that feels like because we have been on the receiving end of that kind of love. *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.*

Richard Selzer is a surgeon who wrote a book called *Mortal Lessons*. He tells this story:

*I stand by the bed where a young woman lies after surgery. Her mouth is twisted with palsy, almost clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be like this from now on. The surgeon did the best he could, but to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve.*

*Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this scarred face I have made, who gaze and touch each other so generously? The young woman speaks.*

*"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.*

*"Yes," I say, "it will. Because the nerve was cut."*

*She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles.*

*"I like it," he says. "It's kind of cute."*

*All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close I can see how he twists his lips to accommodate hers, to show her that their kiss still works.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Harcourt Brace & Co. 1974, p. 45-46; quoted in Ted Loder's *The Haunt of Grace*, Innisfree Press 2002.

Now, John says, I see. See it with me: God isn't some disembodied spirit that watches, or judges, or even sympathizes, as we worry and lose our way and struggle. This God is personal. This God is *in* human life—in your life—in a way that is close-up and intimate and long-term.

You might say that God's love for us, for creation, was ineffable. God couldn't say it adequately in any other way—not in nature, or the Bible, or voices of angels. To become human himself is the only way God had to communicate it fully. *I am you*, God says, also at a loss for words. In a way that God could not express in any other way, God speaks love by coming to live this life with us. God has been us. God *is* us.

And that changes everything.