In the spring of my second year of seminary I started having persistent pain in my left arm that radiated down to my hand. I was eventually diagnosed with deterioration of two spinal discs in my cervical spine, in the region of my neck. The discs were protruding and compromised the spinal nerves and I eventually ended up having surgery to relieve the pressure on the nerves. It was a pretty routine procedure, one that as a surgical nurse I had assisted on many times. As part of the surgery, two levels of my cervical spine were to be fused with bone graft and plates and screws. It was expected that I would be in the hospital overnight and in a soft collar for two weeks and then I would be free to resume normal activities.

I wasn't particularly worried about the surgery, but no procedure is routine when it’s your procedure, if you know what I mean. The week before my surgery I had finished a course taught by Br. David Vryhof, of SSJE, Teaching Others to Pray. One of the prayer practices Br. David introduced to us was praying with icons. The use of icons in prayer is an ancient practice that is seen as a way to enhance a person’s prayer, giving us something visual to meditate on while conversing with God. An icon can serve as a window, opening a space for us to encounter the Divine.

The icon he had us use in prayer is a famous one from the Orthodox Church at the base of Mount Sinai, Christ Pantocrator, or Ruler of the Universe, of Sinai. As I was praying on that day, I noticed on the neck of the icon there was a mark, just the correct size and right in the location where I knew my surgical incision would be. I was so struck by that. I felt as though I was being given assurance of understanding and companionship for what was coming. It was quite an extraordinary experience.

Well, it turned out that when my surgeon was placing the plate and screws that he discovered I had osteoporosis, (actually what he said was, “Sandi, your bone is mush”), in the spine of my neck. Because of that I was placed in a hard collar and forbidden to drive or lift anything for 2 months…THE ENTIRE SUMMER!

Anyone who knows me well, knows that I can’t sit still for long. I was going absolutely stir crazy in a very short period of time. It was hard for me to read because of the angle that the collar placed my head. I felt trapped in my own body. At this time, we lived on a cul-de-sac. If you walked the full length of the road in a loop 3 times, it constituted a mile. I took to walking up and down that street at least three times a day, several miles at a time. My neighbors must have thought I was nuts!

While I walked I listened to lectures from Yale Divinity School on the New Testament, lectures on the Gospels, a series of talks by Richard Rohr on Paul and *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, by Barbara Brown Taylor. And often I just walked in silence, listening to the sound of my feet hitting the pavement, and my breath moving in and out as I climbed up the hill to the top of the street and back down.

During these walks I became increasingly aware that my thoughts were turning more and more to imagining that Jesus was walking along side of me. This was a surprise to me, because up until this point, I had never felt him this close to me, and so grounded in him before. I know that probably sounds strange, after all, I was in seminary. But a sense of the Holy Spirit was always much more present for me than God the Son. To quote Richard Rohr, “*Most religious people I have met, from sincere lay people to priests and nuns, still imagine God to be elsewhere.”* But now I could feel Jesus, God with us, in his humanness and his divine nature, near to me in the same way as when I had prayed with that icon; a real shift from God-out-there to God-right-here.

It was in those moments of walking the street in my suburban neighborhood, and perhaps because I was so present to the reality of my own physical frailty,……… I became very present to the fact that Jesus walked the same earth that I was walking, he breathed the same air that I did, he felt the same sun, the rain, the gentle winds on his skin as I felt on my own. I knew that Jesus knew me, knew my restlessness, knew my frustration and loved me as he accompanied me on my sojourning up and down Linda Lane.

As Christians, we are a Resurrection People, it is true. And we are also a people of the Incarnation. We cannot possibly be one without the other. God sent Christ into the world in flesh, born of a human woman, to live in the midst of the human family. I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates John. He says that Jesus moved into the neighborhood. Into the flesh. With a beating heart. Eyes to see, and ears to hear. Jesus was not some kind of fake human, some impersonation of humanity. In him we have a new relationship with God. God coming to be with us, into our towns, our developments, onto our streets. Jamie talked about it on Christmas day when she said God pitched his tent, the place of the tabernacle, directly in the midst of us. Not a God shut behind doors in a place that only a few privileged ones may enter. God wants to know us in the most intimate way possible, as psychologist Jon Kabat-Zin calls it, the Whole Catastrophe of human living.

Have you ever wondered about Jesus’ experience of human life? Of course, it could not be separate from the wholeness of the human/divine, Jesus was 100% divine and 100% flesh and blood after all. And if that’s the case, he really did know all of what we know and feel and experience. Many in the church have sterilized that about him and have imagined that all of the uncomfortableness and let’s face it, embarrassment of being in these human bodies was certainly not part of his being. But if we are to deny the body, the flesh that God took to Godself in Christ, then I believe that we deny that God knows and loves us, all of us, everything about what we are, what God made us to be and experience in our living.

And conversely, in Christ, God offers us the possibility of experiencing heaven on earth, the possibility of knowing bits and pieces of it as we are in this life. The unknowable becomes known, the un-seeable becomes seen, the impossible becomes possible. Lutheran pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber says it well, *“That's the crazy thing about Christianity — the idea that the finite can contain the infinite. After all, what is the incarnation if not that? So there's an incredible physicality to the spiritual within the Christian story. There's not this weird sort of Greek separation, where there's a higher spiritual world and a corrupted, bad world of flesh. It's all one. Because if God chose to have a body, there's a way in which spiritual things are revealed in the physical things that are all around us — bread, wine, people, tears, laughter.”* (NBW, Accidental Saints; Finding God in All the Wrong People.)

God made flesh, Christ the Word, the essence, the core of being, the one God coming to us in the fullness of relationship, bringing the Light into the world. John’s prologue, as this passage is known, sets the stage for what is to come, the life and ministry and teachings of Jesus, the manifestation of what that life and ministry means in the world. Iraneus, 2nd c Bishop of Lyons wrote that *“God became one of us that we might become one with him.”* One of my professors called John’s gospel the Episcopal gospel. He said this half-jokingly, and qualified it as such because John is such a personal gospel that invites us again and again to uncover who and what Jesus is for us at all different times in our lives.

I love this ever-evolving awareness of God entering into our lives and inviting us into that discovery through Jesus. I love the notion that God did not come only once into the world, but that God still comes, over and over and ever, into our humanness, taking on our fleshiness, ever unfolding before all creation, the light creeping into our nooks and crannies. Christ illuminates us and our world, so we might see it not only as it is, but also as Jesus does, opening us to the Mind of the One who imagined it and brought it forth with the Word and the Light into fullness and grace.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us. No one has ever seen God. It is only God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

From Wendell Berry (This Day, Collected and New Sabbath Poems, 1999, IX)

*The incarnate Word is with us,*

*Is still speaking, is present*

*Always, yet leaves no sign*

*But everything that is.*

Amen.