November 29, 2015

“First Things First: The Incarnation”

John 1:14-18

**FCF**: Not seeing the abiding significance of Jesus’ incarnation

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus, the Word, became flesh and dwelt among us.

(magnet) We can and must live in light of that Gift.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION**:

Some of you may know that one of my favorite books to pull out this time of year is *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Holidays*. In the section on “How to Deal with a Bad Gift,” you find these golden nuggets. Don’t lie or overpraise. Stay neutral. Say something like, “*Oh, I love sweaters*.” Thank the giver for the thought. “*I can’t tell you how much this means to me*.” Try to determine where the gift was purchased so you can return it. “*Wherever did you find this?*” Finally, regift it. But be careful and keep track of who gave it and who you give it to.

All that can be good to know when you’ve received a bad gift. But what if you’ve received the Gift of gifts? What then? That’s a question worth asking this Advent season and in this series, “First Things First” – a survey of John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and Revelation 1.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: John 1:1-18

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION**:

Many gifts at Christmas are meaningless. They are given as filler. Catalogs and stores are glutted with such things. A lot of them have no lasting value, no real implications. But some do. Some of you may remember Chris Hatch, one of the missionaries we support as a church, currently serving with Serge in London. Chris had a friend here in the States named Tim who was battling kidney disease and in need of a transplant. And so five years ago, after much prayer, counsel, and testing, Chris gave Tim one of his kidneys. Chris has told me that they both are doing well. In fact, Tim and his wife have since had two little girls. A beautiful thing.

Some gifts do have lasting implications. But, great as that was, Chris’ loving sacrifice for his friend is but a dim reflection and the fruit of an even greater gift – Jesus, the Word, becoming flesh and dwelling among us. That is the Gift of gifts – Jesus’ coming into this world for us.

The gift to Chris’ friend changed his life. How much more the Gift of gifts? The Gift behind and above anything we could find under a tree is a gift that, understood and embraced, has an even greater transforming impact. And also everlasting implications. Jesus, the Word, became flesh and dwelt among us. It means everything. And we must live in light of that Gift.

I want to come at this from three directions. First, an explanation of the Incarnation. Second, an attempt to illustrate the Incarnation. And third, some implications of the Incarnation.

1. **EXPLAINING THE INCARNATION**

First, an explanation. Let’s consider it. Let’s think about it and be as clear as we can.

1. *Observations*

We’re going to hone in really on just one verse in this passage, v.14 (READ John 1:14a).

1. The Word became flesh

The Son, being one with the Father in divinity, is now one with us in humanity as well. This is “flesh” in terms of our humanity with all its frailty and vulnerability. Fully God and fully man.

1. Dwelt among us

And He “*dwelt among us*,” literally, “*tabernacled among us*.” This was a temporary but real thing – clearly harkening back to the Old Testament period when God traveled with His people through the wilderness, dwelling among them in the midst of the camp. All pointing to Jesus.

1. We have seen his glory

(READ John 1:14) Another allusion to this period, the visible glory of God’s presence with His people, this glory seen anew and, again, more completely in Jesus – the God of grace and truth.

1. *Formulations*

How do we get our minds around this? Let me give you some formulations.

1. Councils

The Church has wrestled with these things for some time. The Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Chalcedon (451), all laboring to faithfully summarize Scripture’s teaching.

1. Confessional

*The Westminster Confession* devotes a section to this (READ *WCF* VIII:2):

*The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time had come, take upon Him man’s nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities of a man, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. This person is very god, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.*

The main thing to carry away and remember is this. His person is one. His nature is two.

1. *Summaries*

Theologians through the centuries have struggled with expressing this in words.

1. Bede

Bede, a prolific writer from the 7th and 8th centuries, said (READ *Proclaiming*, p.62), “*In a wonderful manner he began to be what we are, while continuing to be what he had been, assuming our nature in such a way that he himself would not lose what he had been*.”

1. Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux, a 12th century monastic leader, wisely wrote (READ *Proclaiming*, pp.87, 88), “*The Word is born a child. It is only right that we should be astounded*” and went on to ask, “*Why has the Son of God become man but in order to make all men sons of God?*”

And, frankly, the wisest of our modern writers are saying and asking the same things today.

1. **ILLUSTRATATING THE INCARNATION**

But let us try and get our heads around this a little more. What images might we use?

1. *A Biography of Someone Close*

Merrill Tenney, in his commentary, speaks of a biography (READ Tenney, pp.72-73):

*The nature of the invisible and mysterious God is thus interpreted by One who is qualified to do so through kinship and understanding. In biographical writing a man can best be interpreted to the public by a sympathetic son who has within him the father’s nature and who speaks the language of a generation with which the father did not have direct contact. So God, through a Son who is called God and who is one with the Father, is interpreted to men who have been alienated from Him by sin.*

1. *The Effort of a Strong Man*

C. S. Lewis adds another image in his book, *Miracles* (READ *Miracles*, pp.179-180):

*In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity…down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.*

1. *The Shrinking of the Statue*

Origen, a 3rd century theologian, told of a village with a huge statue – so immense you couldn’t see who it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone miniaturized the statue so the person it honored could be seen. Origen said (READ IV2), “*That is what God did in his Son*.” Christ is the self-miniaturization of God. In Christ we have God in a comprehensible way. In Christ we have God’s own personal and definitive visit to our planet. The Word became flesh.

1. **APPLYING THE INCARNATION**

Jesus is the Gift of gifts. Now, what do we do with this? How do we apply it?

1. *Our Knowledge of God*
2. Great revelation made

Let me suggest five, the first having to do with our knowledge of God (READ John 1:14, 18). The Greek we translate “*made him known*” is related to the word, “*exegesis*” – meaning to clarify the meaning of a text. Jesus is “the exegesis of God,” the exposition of His hidden reality.

1. Great question answered

Which speaks to the great question so many are asking, “*What is God like?*” It’s fairly common for pollsters to ask folks that question this time of year. Not surprisingly, there is a huge scope of varied answers given to that question – a question with enormous implications. “*What is God like?*” Well, with Jesus, God Himself making Himself known, it’s settled. Now we know.

1. *Our Engagement with Life*
2. Disconnect with other religions

Another application has to do with our engagement with life. You need to understand that the Greeks and Romans believed the physical is bad. Eastern religions believe the physical is all an illusion. Judaism and Islam don’t believe God would do such a thing as live in the flesh.

1. Groundedness of Christianity

But Christianity does. So it connects. The Incarnation, God’s taking on flesh, shows that He is concerned not only with the spiritual but with all of life. He knows what it is to be poor, hungry, persecuted, and homeless. He knows what it feels like and is concerned for any going through it. Which impels us to engage people not just with their spiritual questions but all their troubles.

1. *Our Assurance in Suffering*
2. Harmfulness or helplessness of other voices

The Incarnation also gives us assurance in suffering. Moralistic religious voices are just harmful when suffering comes – “*You must not be living right. God must be judging you*.” Other more secular voices are just simply helpless – “*See!* *There is no God. It doesn’t matter how you live*.”

1. Hopefulness of Christianity

But the Incarnation gives hope. It shows God is neither condemning nor missing. He is loving and involved. “*But why then does suffering come?*” We can’t know the reason. But we can know it can’t be because He doesn’t care. For He entered this world to suffer with us and for us.

1. *Our Freedom to Serve*
2. Christ’s condescension and self-humbling

The Incarnation also frees us to serve one another (READ 2 Corinthians 8:9). This is Christ’s condescension and self-humbling, love to the uttermost for the utterly impoverished – us.

1. Our condescension and self-humbling

Which then drives our own. What is “the Christmas spirit”? Seeing how rich we are because of Christ’s pouring Himself out for us. And then spending ourselves for the enriching of others.

1. *Our Ability to Love*
2. The stalemate of defensiveness

The Incarnation also gives us an ability to love. Picture a relationship falling apart. Both parties dug in. Neither side willing to give ground, to let down their defenses. What hope is there?

1. The recovering of intimacy

The only hope of recovering intimacy is found in Jesus’ coming, giving us the ultimate example of letting down the defenses. And that is what enables us to do the same with one another, making real relationships possible. We’re able to risk, knowing who loves us already – one who made Himself vulnerable for us, giving us the ability to be vulnerable with Him and one another.

**CONCLUSION:**

What we’re getting at is the necessity of taking the Incarnation seriously and the marks of what that would look like. I’m reminded here of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. You know the story – a miserly old man, Ebenezer Scrooge, the ghosts who visit him one Christmas Eve, and the change this experience brings to his life. Well, here’s a thought. What if Scrooge had continued on as if nothing had ever happened? What would we say? We’d say he hadn’t heard the message, that he’d missed the meaning of Christmas. And of the Incarnation.

So what did happen? What changes were wrought by the gospel in the heart of this man described as (READ *Carol*) “*a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner. Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster*”? What changes do we see? He became open-hearted, a joy within him nearly inexpressible, a laboring by him to be reconciled to his nephew. He became open-handed. He gladly gave to a local charity. And then to the Cratchits – a dinner, a raise, and a promise to assist the family from there on out. Dickens really captured something there. And it speaks powerfully still today because of the deep well that was tapped.

Christmas is coming. And this time, the story is real and we are in it. Jesus, the Word of God, became flesh and dwelt among us. We need no ghosts to appear in a dream. We have the record here before us in the Scriptures. The Gift of gifts. May its implications work their way into our hearts and through our lives. And may we grow in these things in this Advent season.

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus, the Word, became flesh and dwelt among us.

(magnet) We must live in light of that Gift.