

And Dwelt Among Us

Veiled in Flesh: Christmas with John, Pt. 3

Merry Christmas, everyone. We're so glad to have you with us at SWFF today – thank you for including worship as a part of your Christmas celebration. We've all got big plans today, but it's worth the investment to spend a bit of time reflecting on Jesus – it is his birthday after all. And during Advent, we have been looking at the Christmas story through the Gospel of John.

Now, on the surface, John's account of the birth of Jesus doesn't seem very Christmasy – manger and shepherds and wisemen and all. John's account is philosophical. Of all the disciples, John was clearly the liberal arts major. I delight in pointing out to my CPA wife that the accounting major was Judas.

But despite the lack of nostalgic iconic figures, John's Christmas story may be the most profound of them all. In fact, the very first verse that I am going to read you from today's passage is arguably *the* most profound yet, simplest, concise summary of what Christmas is all about, anywhere in the Bible. How's that for a promotional tease? Well let's jump right in and look at the text. **John 1:14–18...**

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

15 “(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’) 16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.”

17 “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

Ok, so what's so special about that opening verse? The very beginning, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we have seen his glory...” Well, when the original hearers of John's gospel – both Jews and gentiles - *heard* the phrase, ‘the Word became flesh’, it was revolutionary.

In fact, many people have said that John chapter 1, marked a complete revolution in the history of human thought. Jews, when *they* heard “the Word of God” they knew it meant their God was not a remote, unknowable God. The Hebrew God *speaks*: He speaks through His word, God speaks through His prophets, He spoke through the burning bush. He spoke on Mount Sinai. Again and again, so He's not just a remote indescribable god, He's a God who we can *know*. So the Word of God is crucial to Jews.

But for the Greeks – and of course this was originally written in Greek – the word used is *logos*, it says the “logos became flesh.” The *logos* was a term that was very, very significant to the Greeks and the Romans. They believed that the universe was not a chaos, but a cosmos - that there was an order behind it.

And the word *logos* - from which we get our word “logic” - was a philosophical term that meant that the universe was not just a kind of chaotic thing. There was a kind of order, some absolute principles behind it, that we could discern through philosophical contemplation and if we aligned our lives with it, then things would go well. So the *logos* was sort of like the cosmic order at the heart of the universe, to the Greeks. And to the Jews, it was the self-revelation of a knowable God. But a huge concept to both.

And then suddenly, John comes and says, “Yeah, but the Word became *flesh*. And *He* dwelt among us. And we beheld *His* glory.” And what the Jews were realizing John was saying, is that even if you study all the words of the law of God, *the* way now to know God is - if the self-revelation of the Word of God become a human being - *the* way to know God is to know that human being. What a radical statement that is! But the Greeks and Romans realized what he was saying was that *the* way to connect to the very cosmic

center of the universe is to know this flesh and blood human being - it is just incredible.

The Word became *flesh*. And by the way the word “flesh” there, is a kind of graphic word; it’s a word that means “meat”. “Incarnation” – Spanish speakers, what’s *carne*? - God put on a meat suit! And it was a way of saying the Word became *really* physical - didn’t just *appear* to be a human being, wasn’t a hologram - the Word became flesh. That the Son of God - the Creator God, the transcendent God, the cosmic Center of the universe - became a flesh and blood human being who can be known, Jesus Christ. Now *that’s* Christmas. That’s the whole sermon actually, thanks for coming!

But that’s what the doctrine is, that’s what the teaching is. But what I’d like to do is think about the fact that Christmas doesn’t change our lives like it ought to. This is a life transforming truth...in *many* ways. But what I’d like to do is draw out three ways in which grasping this truth should change our lives. Three *extremely* practical implications. If you really believe the doctrine of Christmas, then these three things are true and we should grasp them with both hands and make sure that we live them out. Here we go...

Number one, if Christmas happened, and it did, we have infinite comfort in the face of suffering. We have *infinite comfort* in the face of suffering. Now, by the way, Christmas comforts us, or strengthens us for suffering actually at two levels. First is just frankly, there's the understanding level - almost kind of like the intellectual level. See, when you see somebody suffering, who's really a good person, a wonderful person, but they're going through *horrendous* suffering. It's just natural to say, "What kind of God would allow something like that?"

And it's typical, unfortunately, for religious people to say something like this, "Well, you know, God works in mysterious ways, and He has His good reasons and it's too complicated for us. So you just have to have faith." Religious people talk like that all the time. And I have to say it's kind of infuriating. It feels shallow, it feels callous, and you want to say "*Why* should I trust this God and how do *you* know He's got good reasons? Who are you to know this God's motives?" But I'll tell you how...Christmas is how, actually.

Back during the pandemic shut down - remember all that extra time we had on our hands? - well, I read more fiction that I normally get to - usually reading theology and such. And I sat down and read Albert Camus' great novel, *The Plague* - hey, we all coped in different ways! But I'm fascinated by Camus, the French existentialist philosopher and novelist, and I've never gotten over my

surprise from something he wrote about Jesus in one of his essays.

Listen to this, "[Christ] the god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death." (Albert Camus, *Essais*)

Jesus, God in flesh, abandoned his privilege and experienced the agony of death. So we can't completely blame him. And what Camus is saying, I think, is just simply this...his argument is, if God came to earth and involved Himself in a life of pain, and suffered *enormously*, suffered infinitely, suffered *horrendously*...*then* if you ask, "Well why is God allowing evil and suffering to continue?", we still don't know what the reason He is doing that *is* - be honest, be humble, we still don't know what the reason *is*.

But now we know what the reason *isn't*. It isn't that God doesn't care...it isn't that God's remote...it isn't that God doesn't love us. See? What Camus is saying is "I still don't know why; but the fact that God suffers too...you can't overlook that." And so see, even at a kind of understanding level as Camus says, it's a suffering God, you don't shake your fist at that God in the same way. You still don't know. You still wrestle. At the same time you say, "I know He loves us." It's not a full answer, but it's a help.

But it's not just at the understanding level. The doctrine of Christmas helps out at the actual experience level, when you're actually going through it, when you really are in darkness and despair.

Hebrews 2:18 says, "*Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*" Because Jesus suffered, he can help you.

Listen, if you're going through something really hard, and some well-meaning person who's never experienced what you've experienced, comes along and says, "Oh, you know, get tough! You can do it, you can get through it." There's something in us that wants to say, and sometimes we *do* say it, "You have no idea what I'm going through, you know, save your breath." They mean well, but it's not helpful.

But if you meet somebody who has not only been through every single thing you've been through, but ten times worse...ten times worse! You *listen* to that person, don't you? And when that person says, "do this, and do that, and you can do it", see when *that* person strengthens you, you feel strengthened.

Well, look at Jesus. Here's the only God who *knows*. Of all the religions in the world this is the *only* one that says God has been in every darkness you've been and more. You feel alone and misunderstood?

So was He. Are you betrayed? So was He. Are you destitute, are you facing death? So was he. Are you saying, "but I feel God has abandoned me"? Think about it. So was He! "Well, I prayed and God hasn't answered my prayer", go to the garden in Gethsemane passage. See Jesus was turned down too.

Every place you could ever go, He's been there. Every darkness you could ever be in, He's been there and more. He can strengthen you, that's what it says. He *will* strengthen you; go to Him. So, first of all, the doctrine of Christmas gives you infinite comfort in suffering. Are you applying it? Look, everybody, all you out there who are human beings, okay. The rest of you can just not listen for a minute, but all human beings, you either *have* suffered or you *are* suffering or soon you *will* be suffering something. So do you have this? Okay, number one, Christmas give us an infinite comfort in suffering.

Number two...second thing Christmas does is give us a powerful conviction to serve. See, when God came down, at the incarnation, He got involved. All the stories in the gospels are pictures of a God who is involved. Most of us don't like to get involved. Do you know the story behind how dialing 911 in an emergency came about? It's a tragic story.

Back in the 60's a woman in Queens, New York was brutally murdered in the street outside her home and all the neighbors heard her crying for help – like 37 witnesses. But no help came. No one even called the police. And it shocked the nation. Led to a big debate about what's happened to our society. They coined a term, “bystander syndrome” – because when reporters interviewed the witnesses later, some of them famously said, “I didn't want to get involved.”

Why? Because being involved makes you vulnerable. Think of it, if you see someone being beaten up and I you try to intervene, maybe they beat you up too. So we don't get involved. The first place we get this image in the Bible is near the beginning, where Cain kills Abel. And God comes to Cain and, (**Genesis 4:10**) “*The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.”*

And there's a number of places in the Bible where we're told that shed blood of the innocent - the evils and the injustice that are perpetrated here on Earth - *cry out* to God. What does the doctrine of Christmas teach? That God heard those cries, and He *did* come down. He came down, He got involved, and He *knew* He would be killed.

Now, here's what's so scary. In **Philippians 2:5-8**, Paul gives us some instructions. “*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!***”

So Paul says when you see Jesus Christ coming down, getting involved to the point of vulnerability, to the point of being just drained of life, now *you* go do that, too. *That's* what it says! *That's* your model. What are you gonna do about that? See, this isn't like the first point, infinite *comfort*. The second point is infinite *conviction*, that we ought to be getting involved.

I mean, listen, this applies in a lot of different ways. They're not all life threatening, but for example, Christians talk about giving, you know, you can give to the point it's comfortable. You can say I want to give this amount away, and the amount you're giving away has absolutely no impact on the way you live your life. It's not really cutting into your savings, not cutting into investments, it's not cutting into your lifestyle, you're able to do the things you want to do. This is money that's almost literally disposable, okay?

That's not getting involved. Give to the point where you feel vulnerable, give to the point where you say, "I can't do things I would like to do", give to the point where you're not quite as financially secure as you would have been if you hadn't. Give and give and give – until what? Until you're starting to act like Jesus, until you're starting to imitate the incarnation. Give to the point of vulnerability.

Or think about this. A lot of people come to church, but they never join. They come to *receive*, but they don't want to join, they don't want the accountability. They don't want the responsibility. They want to keep their options open all the time. But see, you don't want to get involved. Not *too* involved, to the point where it's actually cramping you. But my goodness, imitate the incarnation.

Or, listen, there are people around you that you may actually have been a little afraid to even look at because you don't want to get involved. There are neighbors, there are colleagues, there are brothers and sisters, there are people around you who are hurting, they've got needs and you know that if you show much interest and if you show much sympathy, you're going to kind of get sucked in, it'll be emotionally draining, it'll be difficult. Get involved!

You know that if you publicly identify as a Christian in certain circles, there might be some flak you'll take. Get involved! To the point of vulnerability.

B.B. Warfield taught theology at Princeton. He preached a sermon based on that passage from Philippians 2 called "Imitating the Incarnation"; it's going to sound a little bit Victorian, but it's still quite powerful. He says "Jesus was led to forget himself in the needs of others. Self-sacrifice brought Jesus Christ into the world and self-sacrifice will lead his followers not away from but into the midst of human society. Wherever people suffer, there will we be to comfort. Wherever they strive, there will we be to help. Wherever they fall, there will we be to uplift.

Self-sacrifice means not indifference to our times and our fellows, it means absorption in them. It means forgetfulness of self and others, it means entering into every person's hopes and fears, longings and despairs...It means not that we should live one life but a thousand lives binding ourselves to a thousand souls by the filaments of so loving a sympathy that their lives become ours."

So first practical implication, *infinite comfort* in the face of suffering; second practical implication *powerful conviction* to serve others, to the point of vulnerability, to get involved, to come down.

But lastly, Christmas gives us a realistic hope that endures. Look again at this passage, **V.14**, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” I’ve just spent the whole time just on the ‘*Word became flesh*’, but it says ‘*...and made His dwelling among us*’. Now, some of you may have heard before that there’s a kind of odd Greek word used there, and some literal translations will put it there. What John actually says is the Word became flesh and “pitched this *tent* among us” or “tabernacled among us.”

Why in the world would John say, “the word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us”? Well, it tells you right away, “*...and we have seen His glory*”. And then later on it talks about “*for the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*” What is this talking about? Here’s what it’s talking about.

The tabernacle was the place, in the days of Moses, where the Shekinah glory of God dwelled. But back behind in the Holy of Holies - it was both the tabernacle and later the temple – but there was this veil between sinful people and the glory of God. And nobody could actually go back there, except the high priest once a year, but people could draw near as long as there were blood sacrifices made to atone for sin. Now, what is all that about?

It was about what happened in the very beginning of the Bible, the Garden of Eden. Here’s Adam and Eve, and they are in paradise - the ideal world! And everything’s perfect, but then they sin, they turn away from God. They want to be their own masters, their own saviors and lords, and they’re cast out into, what? The *real* world! And the real world...by the way, we’re all in the real world, so let me just tell you two things about the real world. Everybody loses everyone they love eventually *and*, all life ends in death. Merry Christmas! You emptied your stocking and some hard truth fell out!

So they were cast out of the ideal world - where none of those things are true - into the real world. And between the real and the ideal world was a flaming sword - you can go see this back in Genesis 3, a flaming sword that turned everyone away. What is *that*? It’s the penalty for our sin. If you are a fugitive, or you’re an exile, you run away... if you want to come back home, you’re going to have to face justice.

And so what the Bible is actually trying to say is the barrier between the real and the ideal is a barrier between God and sinful human beings. There’s a barrier there and no one can pass it, without paying the penalty, which is what? For the wages of sin are...death.

Now think about this...What is Christmas about? The Word became flesh. Okay, that's just a magic trick, big one, of course, but a magic trick still; but no, "in order to dwell among us so that we could see His glory". What does that mean? It means, first of all, the ideal came into the real; Jesus Christ, the ideal, actually came into the real. Here he is, but that wasn't all.

At the end of his life, he *died*. Jesus became a human being *so that* he could die - he became vulnerable, as we said. And when Jesus went to the Cross, he went under the sword. He took the penalty. And when He did that - some of you may remember - the book of Matthew says that at the moment of Jesus' death, the veil between us and God, between the real and the ideal, was torn from top to bottom.

And what that means is simply this, Jesus Christ, has opened a hole in the wall of our exile. He's punched a hole between the ideal and the real. He came through it. And now, he's opened a way for us to get back in - into perfection, into Eden, into eternity. Right now, the wall has not come completely down, but the Holy Spirit comes into us when we believe in Jesus Christ and changes begin. And someday the whole wall *will* come down. And the real world will become the ideal world again.

And don't we long for that? This world is so broken. Everywhere you look. This was a difficult year for me in a lot of ways. One of them was denominationally. I stood up against the covering up of evil at the highest levels of my District. After ten years as a Presbyterian, I resigned my office because I could not in good conscience go along with the failures of leadership. And a number of my colleagues urged me not to be so radical. Don't rock the boat. You're "tilting at windmills", I was told.

I actually really identify with that reference. It's from the tale of *Don Quixote* - Cervantes' early 17th century masterpiece that's often been called the "first modern novel". Maybe you've read it, or even seen the musical *Man of La Mancha*, which romanticizes the basic story a bit. But it's the story of a minor Spanish nobleman who reads so many romance novels that he becomes disenchanted with the real world and decides he's going to live in the ideal world. So he announces that he's a knight and he sets off to fight dragons and giants, which are of course really just windmills. This the famous reference.

And, you know, really he's gone mad. So at one point somebody sits down and tries to talk to him, and says, "you know, there are no evil sorcerers, there are no dragons, there are no giants, you know that none of these things are true". To which Quixote says, "Well, facts are the enemy of truth." And he wasn't even on FaceBook! And then the the guy who's trying to argue with him says, "This is *madness!*"

Let's look at the actual response from the novel, "When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams - this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness - and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!" — (Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*)

Now that was written 400 years ago, but I'm telling you, that is very postmodern existentialism. *Don Quixote* fits us today. Here's a guy who is saying, "You know, I'm *not* really crazy. I *know* there's a wall between the ideal and the real. Here's the life as it is, the real. And as it *ought to be*, the ideal. And I'm just going to live in the way life ought to be and not the way it is. That's all there is to it. I *know* that they will never come together. I know this will end in defeat. I know I'm not being 'realistic'. But I'd rather have the fantasy than the real."

But you see, Christians are utterly different. There are two kinds of people...and then there's Christians. There's the realists who say, "Hey, come on, this is the way life is, you know, don't be a Boy Scout, don't rock the boat..." that kind of thing. And then there's the idealists, they're saying, "Maybe I am making a mountain out of a mole hill, but by golly I'm willing to *die* on that mole hill! I will go down with this ship!" So you have the idealists, and the realists...and then you have Christians.

And *we* know that Jesus Christ has brought the ideal into the real and *someday*, there'll be a new heavens and new earth and you can have glorified bodies, and that means that even though we're realistic - we know there's a *lot* that's wrong with this world - and we don't expect it to fully happen until Jesus actually makes everything right. But if you're a Christian, you'll never look at *anything* and say, "That'll never change." You'll never look at *any* evil - you never look at anything wrong inside or outside - and say "that could never change" because you know, that even *now*, with the power of the Holy Spirit, it *can* change, and someday it *will*.

What reality; you see how realistic that is? Much more realistic than the person who's living in the ideal world, but far more idealistic and *hopeful* than the person living in the real world. You know, in that novel, there's a woman named Aldonza, who's a common prostitute, and Don Quixote treats her as if she's a queen, royalty – his Dulcinea, "the sweetest one".

And at first she's angry about it, but then in the end, she's moved by it, and she embraces it. She accepts the fantasy; she's going to live as if she *is* royalty, even though she's not. But look, do you understand that you're an Aldonza? Maybe not literally – although actual prostitutes faired very well around Jesus also.

But I want you to know that if you believe in Jesus Christ, he embraces you. You can be royalty, *real* royalty. Both now and forever. You know, when all the kings and queens of all the great royal lines on the earth are all forgotten, you will be ruling and reigning with Jesus. Because he's punched a hole between the real and the ideal - we have a realistic and infallible hope. Christ the Savior is born. Jesus is the logos. And because the logos became flesh and lived among us, we can have hope. Real, lasting hope. And that's worth singing about at Christmas.

Let's pray...