

The Story of God and Us: Incarnation

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Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *O God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel and then, O God, open our hands that we might serve you and our neighbors. Amen.*

I know that Zoom is marvelous technology. We have used it, learned it, and our learning curve has been steep, as we've been learning how to use it. And I know that many of you have, too. Every day seems to have four or five Zoom meetings, of which I'm a part. It's a marvelous technology that allows you to see peoples' faces instead of just talking to them on the phone. FaceTime on my phone is marvelous technology. I'm able to see my children and grandchildren in California and New York City. And just to be able to connect with them and to see how they're growing is such incredible technology. But I'm going to tell you something. It isn't the same as being there in the flesh, of being there in person.

On Sunday mornings, we're having wonderful worship, but it isn't quite the same is it? It's not the same as being in the room together and being able to hug one another, of being able to encourage and just look at one another's faces and to reach out and touch them. It isn't the same for me to see my grandchildren on a screen as it is to be able to have them pile on top of me and us wrestle and have fun together - to just touch one another.

This last week we have been saying, "Farewell, see you soon" to Rev. Bill Denham and Rev. Thomas Harper. Bill is retiring from St. Luke's here, and Thomas is going to be the pastor at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in College Station. And we've wanted to express our love, but it just isn't the same. We can do it on Zoom, and we can share things on Zoom, but it isn't the same as being able to put our arms around each other, even being able to hold hands and pray together.

We're talking today about Incarnation. When we started, we looked through the whole story of God. We began by talking about creation that all of us are created. That God created everything, including us, and we were created in the image of God. But we were given free will, and we wandered away. And our sin has separated us from God, and there's nothing we can do to overcome that sin. God has reached out to us. We've talked about covenants, which are relationships built on a promise. And God always keeps those covenants. But we continue to break them, and it breaks God's heart because God continues to try and maintain that relationship God has with us.

So ultimately, we are going to be talking now about Jesus. And for the next three weeks, we're going to be talking about his life - the Incarnation - his death, the atonement, and his resurrection. Resurrection is the word we've chosen for that.

So, what is the reason for that? Many years ago, one of my daughters was in college and kind of had a crisis. I think that happens with multiple daughters. She had a crisis so one day the phone rang, and my wife and I said, “We’ll be there. We’re on our way.” We got in the car and off we went.

I feel like when I read the story of God, I see the prophets calling out to God. There’s a passage where the prophet says, “When will you tear open the heavens and come down? When will you save your people, God?” It’s like that phone call that God gets, and God says, “I’m on my way. I’m going to come in person - in the flesh.”

The word Incarnation means *with flesh*. We talk about chili con carne is chili with meat. So, I often think of Jesus as God Con Carne - God with meat on.

What I’d like for us to ask ourselves this week is three questions. The first is “Why did Jesus Come?” the second is “What did he show us?” and the third is “To whom did he come?” Then I want us to talk about what that means for us.

First, why did Jesus come? One of the nice things about being here at St. Luke’s is that there are a lot of smart people here. And one of them is Dr. Philip Tallon, he’s the head of the School of Christian Thought at Houston Baptist University. When the Baptists were looking for someone to teach them about Christian thought, they reached out to the Methodists because they knew we would have it. He’s a good Methodist, trained at a Methodist seminary.

He pointed me to the writings of Athanasius. He lived in the fourth century in the 300s, and he was the Bishop of Alexandria. His focus was on the preexistent Christ, the idea that Jesus existed from the beginning, along with God. It wasn’t that Jesus was at some point created by God, or that Jesus was created at the time he was born here on earth. But that Christ the Son was always there with God. And in fact, Colossians tells us that all things were created through Christ. Even creation was through Christ.

Athanasius talks about why Jesus came. I’m going to read to you one little passage, and this is a very thick part of the story. If you read the book, it’s really far more accessible than that. But here’s what I want to read: “For as, when the likeness painted on a panel has been effaced by stains from without, he whose likeness it is must needs come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood: for, for the sake of his picture even the mere wood on which it is painted is not thrown away but the outline is renewed upon it.”

You remember we said that each one of us was created in the image of God. We've distorted that image. We are as we'd say we are God's self-portrait. What Athanasius is saying is that we've destroyed, stained, and distorted that self-portrait. So how are we going to know what God looks like? Jesus comes. Jesus is the renewal of God's self-portrait so that we know who God looks like and what we as God's image are to look like. It's such a marvelous picture that he came to show us who God is and who we are to be.

Our passage from Philippians gives us a little different picture they're tied together. Let me read it, "Though he was in the very form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." The word is sometimes translated "grasped" or "Seized as a prize." It goes on, "But emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death, even death on a cross."

This is called the Kenotic Hymn from the word for "empty" - *kenosis* - to pour oneself out. Here's an idea that's been helpful to me. Most of the religions of the world are focused on becoming holy enough that God is up here and holy and we're down here and not as holy. And we try to live lives holy enough to go and be close to God, if we can just get close enough to God by living holy enough.

The Christian faith is exactly the converse of that. That instead of us trying to get holy enough to be with God, God chose to come down and be with us. To say, "I'm going to come and restore our relationship. I can't sit and wait any longer for you to honor the covenants and for us to be in relationship together. I'm going to come down and be with you."

God came to be with us - to be in relationship with us. And to show us who God is.

So, the second question is, "What did Jesus show us?" If he came to show us, what did Jesus show us? Philippians says it this way, and you notice it began with these words, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Then it describes his humility. Athanasius calls it "humiliation," which I think is a more powerful word.

What he's saying is that we are to be like Jesus. We are to live like Jesus; we are to humble ourselves like Jesus. The very center of the gospel is found in Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. This is sort of the canon within the canon - the central part of the teachings of Jesus. The very first thing he does in his ministry in Matthew is after he's gathered his disciples, he takes them apart for a training retreat. He goes up on the mountain, away from the crowds, so he can

explain to them how they're going to be different than the world around them. And he explains this whole new way of life, this completely different way of living. It's crazy the things he says. He says, "You're blessed, you're happy when you mourn. You're blessed when you're poor. That if you're meek, you're a blessed person." What? He says, "Not only are we folks who won't kill, but we won't even be angry. Not only are we folks who won't commit adultery, we won't even lust in our hearts." They asked him how many times they should forgive a brother or sister. Maybe seventy times? He says, "No, seven times seventy times. Not just seventy times but seven times seventy times."

When we pray, we don't pray where other people can see us praying so that they'll think we're great. No, we go into our closet and pray because we're praying for God, not for others. When we pray our spiritual disciplines, we don't do them so other people will see us and think we're great. No, we do them privately so that we know that we're only doing them for God. We don't worry about what we will eat or what we will drink. Wow! It's just this entirely new way of life! And what Jesus calls this way of life is the Kingdom of God. It's the reign of God. He challenges us to sign up for this reign of God.

Sometimes it seems so obvious that our mission is to live and love like Jesus. And that's true, but we have to understand that it's a radical step for us to make that decision. So many of us want to be believers, we want to claim Christ as our Savior, but we don't really want to be disciples. We don't want to adopt a whole new set of values, a whole new way of life, a whole new way of spending our money, a whole new way of treating other people. We don't want to make Jesus Lord of our lives; we'll just be satisfied if he'll be our Savior.

Jesus came to show us the Kingdom of God.

So, here's the third question: to whom did Jesus come? When you read the Gospels, what we see is Jesus really seems to like to hang out with those who are isolated, who are outcasts, who are hurting, who are sick or hungry. He seems to avoid the hyper-religious people, seems to be attracted to the tax collectors, those who are rejected by the society around them. When he begins his ministry, we read in the Gospel of Luke; he goes back to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. When he's there, he unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and reads what is often called "His Mission Statement." Here's what he reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has appointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the

prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19).

We're celebrating the Incarnation today, and when we look at the Christmas story often during that season leading up to it - Advent - we'll focus on the annunciation where the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her she would be the mother of the Messiah. She sings this song that we often have performed in some way at Christmas time or during Advent. It's called the Magnificat, where she says, "My soul magnifies the Lord," and she says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed."

But we often miss or ignore the rest of her song. She says, "He has performed mighty deeds with his arms; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:51-5).

When you read that, you might think then that Jesus came to the poor. That Jesus came to the outcast. And that's true. But Jesus also came to the proud. And Jesus also came to the rich. It's just that he came to do different things. For some of us, we need to be knocked down off our thrones. For some of us, we need to be humbled. For others, we need to be lifted up. And at different times in our lives and different experiences when we grieve, we are lifted up as those who are mourning. Jesus came for all of us.

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is the story of the Prodigal Son - it's often called the Story of the Two Sons, and here's why. You probably know the story. The Prodigal has gone off and blown his inheritance on wine, women, and song, and he comes back home again. His father runs down the road to greet him even though he has been such a ne'er-do-well. And the father throws a party for him and the elder brother is just mad. He says to his father, "You never threw a party for me." And then he goes outside, and he pouts.

And the father doesn't just run down the road to welcome the younger son; he goes out of the party to seek out the older son. He says, "C'mon back in! You're missing the party!"

Both the younger and the older son were lost. All of us, rich, poor, those with power and the powerless - all of us need to experience the presence of God, of Jesus Christ in our lives to transform, to change us.

Who did he come to? To whom did he come? To all of us.

So, what are we going to do with this then? If Jesus came to be with us and show us, and if he came to show us the Kingdom of God, and if he came to all of us, what does it mean for us? Here's the funny thing. We talk about the Incarnation where Jesus comes in the flesh, but I don't see him in the flesh anymore. He lived among us, he died, was resurrected, but then he ascended and "sits at the right hand of God." That's what the Scripture tells us. So how can we have a relationship with him? There's no "flesh" here now.

Here's what the Scripture tells us, that the Incarnation is the body of Christ, the physical body of Christ. And that the church, those of us who are his followers, are now the *soma Christou* - that's the Greek for the Body of Christ. It literally means the physical body. The *soma*, the actual flesh and blood. We are to be the flesh and blood of Jesus in the world around us. We are to be his hands, his feet, to be his voice, to have his heart, to have his mind. That's what it means for us to be the Body of Christ.

There's a passage in the Gospel of John in the twelfth chapter where Jesus is in Jerusalem in his last week. Some Greeks come and find Philip, and they say to him, "Sir, can we see Jesus? We want to see Jesus." And that request echoes through my mind all the time. That the world around us, looking at those of us who are followers of Jesus, want to actually see Jesus in us. See Jesus in the very way we live.

Nicholas Kristof is a journalist, and many years ago, he went to the Congo to cover the civil war there. When he came back, he wrote about it. Here's what he writes: "One of the most inspiring figures I've ever met while covering Congo's brutal civil war is a determined Polish nun in the terrifying hinterland, feeding orphans, standing up to drunken soldiers and comforting survivors, all in a war zone. I came back and decided, "I want to grow up and become a Polish nun." He was so moved by that.

All over the world, there are people who are acting as the hands, the feet, and the voice of Christ. And, friends, you don't have to move to the Congo. You can get a paper sack, fill it with canned goods and non-perishables and bring it to our food drive on Saturday. Or go to the person who lives next door to you, the elderly person there who maybe needs someone to get groceries for them. Or write a note - not an email but a handwritten note - something that's concrete. Write it to somebody who might be lonely and needs to know you care about them. We do something so that others will see Jesus in us.

A long time ago, when our first child was to be born, I was a youth director in Duncanville, Texas. It was in the summer, and I was off on a youth trip, and my wife was seven months pregnant. She was out mowing the grass since I was out of town. She finished, and a week goes by, I was still out on a trip when she looked out of the window, and she sees the elderly next-door neighbor mowing our grass for us. He is the guy who likes to sit in a chair on his driveway. He said, "I looked out and saw you mowing the grass, and I thought, 'That lady cannot continue to do that.'" So, he decided he was going to mow the grass from then on for her. It can be such a small thing - for us to realize that our calling is to be the hands and feet, the voice, the heart, the mind of Christ in a world that is looking for something they can touch.

Incarnation - God with flesh on.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we're so thankful that you came to be in this intimate relationship with us. That you came in the flesh. And we're so grateful, God, that you came down, rather than expecting us to come up. And that now that you have claimed us as yours that you are at work in our lives to help us to live and love like you. God, show us how to be that flesh in the world around us. So that others won't just see you as this spiritual force, but rather they'll see us as God with flesh on. We pray in the name of Christ, Amen.*