

God Made Flesh for Us

What is the point of a Christmas morning service? Based on attendance every year, the real show was last night. And if you think about it, when did the events of the first Christmas take place? The shepherds were out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks *at night*. So I guess it doesn't surprise me that Christmas Eve has come to be the much bigger service. So why do we even have a service on Christmas Day? Partially, it's because of the assumption that Jesus was born at midnight, so the way we think of it, Christmas Day really started at midnight last night, so Jesus wasn't born on Christmas Eve. He was born on Christmas Day. There are some technical liturgical arguments, but whatever the traditional reasons for this service, I think there is tremendous symbolism in having a Christmas Day service: when Jesus was born, a new day dawned for mankind, the day of grace. For all of human history before that, grace was a promise. Mankind was doomed by our own sin and all people could do was wait for God to send that Savior who would change everything for us. The birth of Christ is the key first step toward that change, so waking up on Christmas morning and celebrating the new day of grace just seems right to me. But what are we celebrating? It's more than a baby's birth. Today, we're celebrating the greatest miracle in all of history: **God made flesh for us.**

In our gospel lesson for today, the apostle John speaks of the Word who was with God – that is with God the Father – and who was himself God – that is, he was and is God the Son. John says, **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”** That's John's way of sharing the Christmas gospel. I'm always struck by the fact that John calls Jesus “the Word.” During our Wednesday night Advent services this year, I pointed out to you that “the Word” is Jesus *before* he came into this world. John is speaking very carefully here. He does not use the name “Jesus” until three verses after the ending of our gospel lesson for this morning! And in fact, the Bible never uses the name “Jesus” for the Son of God before he came into this world. Even when the angel Gabriel commanded Mary to name her baby Jesus, he was giving instructions for after the baby came. The Old Testament never uses the name of Jesus even for the coming Savior. It calls him Immanuel, which means God with us – God in human flesh. Jeremiah says that the coming Savior's name would be “The LORD our Righteousness,” and once he even calls him “David.” Moses calls him “the Seed of the Woman.” And there are lots of other Old Testament names for Jesus. Even that name Christ, which is the Greek translation of Messiah or the Anointed One, comes from the Old Testament. But that name Jesus, the name God specifically chose for his newborn Son, is never used for him until the New Testament, and always for the person you could see and hear and touch.

Why does God do that? In part to teach us who and what Jesus really is: the Son of God was made flesh. Not, the Son of God took the form of a human being. Not, the Son of God possessed a human being. Not, the Son of God was joined with a human being or combined with a human being. All of those things would lead in the wrong direction. The Son of God – the Word – was made flesh. In the womb of the Virgin Mary God did the impossible. The Son of God assumed a human nature, so that God is man and this man is God. At one and the same time, one person has two whole and complete natures. All that we are, Jesus is, except that he had no sin. And all that God is, Jesus is. That will always be true. When we go to heaven, we will meet Jesus face to face and he will still be God and man.

That is the miracle. And it's made even greater by the fact that God hid all that he is in the body of the baby boy. Now that hiding was temporary. Our loved ones who see Jesus in heaven today, see all the glory of the Son of God. When Jesus returns, he will come in all his glory. But until that day, his glory is hidden from us in heaven. While Jesus walked this earth, he hid his glory in his human body. So when that baby was born, Mary wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger. That baby grew hungry and tired. He had to eat and sleep. The Bible tells us that the child grew and even learned – which always amazes me. The Son of God who knows everything learned in his human nature. Finally, Jesus was bound and tortured and nailed to cross and died. He didn't reveal his glory to Roman soldiers who were pounding the nails into his flesh or to the Jewish leaders who were mocking him and challenging him to come down off that cross.

Because that glory was hidden already on Christmas night, God sent angels to tell the shepherds what had happened. Sometimes, the greatest treasures are hidden and sometimes the things that seem most valuable are tricks. Last week, I saw a Facebook post warning about “fool's chocolate” being hidden in Christmas cookies. Do you know what “fool's chocolate” is? Raisins – at least according to that post. Of course, the joke

is based on fool's gold – iron pyrite – which looks like gold but is worthless and has fooled many miners into thinking they're rich. But it goes the other way, too. In Nevada after the California gold rush, prospectors discovered gold again. But it had this funny blue stuff stuck to it. That funny blue stuff was so hard to get rid of and there was so much more of it than the gold that it was impossible to make money gold mining there. You know what blue stuff was? Silver. And the miners threw it away.

God hid the greatest treasure we could ever have in the body of a baby who did not grow up to conquer kingdoms or overthrow empires. He grew up poor. He was despised and rejected and finally died the most painful and humiliating death the ancient world could come up with. To save us. That is the real gold. But we can get so caught up chasing fool's gold. We chase after pleasure and money and popularity and happiness. Often, even in this life, getting those things leaves us disappointed. Sadly, even we Christians sometimes fail to appreciate the treasure God hid in the manger of Bethlehem. But that treasure is our ticket to eternal life.

Why did God hide who Jesus really was? To be fair, Jesus gave glimpses of who he was, every time he did a miracle. But he still hid the full glory of the Son of God. Why? If Jesus had revealed his glory during his life here, it would've meant the end of God's plan to save us. What Roman soldier would've dared to crucify the Son of God? Jesus simply would not have died to save us, so revealing his true glory in a sinful world would've had to mean that Jesus was judging the world instead of saving it. But that's not why this baby was born. He came to die for us, so God hid all that he was in that baby. And God was scourged and mocked. God had a crown of thorns shoved down on his head. God was nailed to a cross and gave up his spirit and died. Not God the Father. But God the Son, who is truly and completely God just as his Father is.

Why did God inflict all that on himself? God's justice demands that sinners die and go to hell. You and I are sinners, truly and without doubt. On Christmas Day, I don't want to dwell on our failings, but is there a better day to illustrate jealousy and greed and pettiness? Did everyone rejoice in their gifts this year? Was everyone content in what they got and happy for everyone else? Did everyone – including us adults – behave themselves this year? Or were there stupid arguments? Did stress show itself in short tempers and unpleasant comments? Did the failings in our marriages, in our parenting, in our love for each other manage to push to the front this year? Don't we all have to admit that when we were supposed to be celebrating one of the greatest and most spiritual holidays of the year, we made it all too clear just how sinful we are?

Jesus came to save us from that sin and from the hell and death that sin deserves. Part of that was Jesus living as a real human being in our place. The Son of God is not subject to the Ten Commandments. But when God became man, God became subject to his own law. And God kept that law perfectly and God died – again, God the Son, not God the Father. But the point is, God did all that so that it counts for us. If I were perfect – and I hope my wife or children didn't just burst out laughing at the mere thought of something so ridiculous – but if I were perfect, I could only save myself. Even if God let me take your place, at most, I could save one of you. Jesus didn't come just to save one person. He didn't come just to save Mary or Joseph or even just the people of Bethlehem or even just the Jewish race. Jesus came to save the world. All people who had ever been born or who ever would be born. Jesus came to pay for the sins of the entire human race. To do that, to live under God's law and to die, he had to be a real man. But for it to count for all of us, he had to be God. So the Son of God took human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born in Bethlehem.

So Christmas truly is the dawn of a new day, the day of salvation. Through the prophet Isaiah, God had promised, **“In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you.”** St. Paul quoted those words and wrote, **“I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”** The new day dawned when God entered this world and the Word became flesh. You and I live in that day of salvation. God has brought that gospel to us and given us faith in Christ. Through that faith, he has already given us eternal life. That's our Christmas present from God. And he even sent us out to share that good news with the world. But it isn't morning anymore. Already two thousand years ago, Jesus warned us that night is coming and he told us that he is coming quickly. The sun is getting low in the sky. The day of salvation will end and Jesus will return in glory and he will, indeed, judge the world. But even that day will not be a day of terror for us. Because that Christmas present God gave us means that we will pass through that judgment unscathed. We will rise and we will get a new heavens and a new earth and we will live in light of Christ forever. That, too, is God's Christmas present to you – Merry Christmas! Amen.