

GOD WITH US

Paul Harvey once told this story; this is about a modern man, one of us, he was not a scrooge, he was a kind, decent, mostly good man, generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others. But he did not believe in all that incarnation stuff that the Churches proclaim at Christmas time. It just didn't make sense to him and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just could not swallow the Jesus story about God coming to earth as man. I'm truly sorry to distress you, he told his wife, but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve. He said he'd feel like a hypocrite. That he would much rather stay home, but that he would wait up for them. He stayed, they went. Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier, then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper. Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. Then another and another. At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. Well, when he went to the front door, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large landscape window. Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter -- if he could direct the birds to it. He quickly put on his coat and galoshes, trampled through the deepening snow to the barn, opened the door wide, and turned on a light. But the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in and he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow making a trail to the yellow lighted wide open doorway of the stable, but to his dismay the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them, he tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms -- instead they scattered in every direction except into the warm lighted barn. Then he realized they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature, if only I could think of some way to let them know they can trust me. That I'm not trying to hurt them, but to help them. How? Any move he made tended to frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him. If only I could become a bird myself he thought. If only I could be a bird and mingle with them and speak their language, and tell them not to be afraid, and show them the way to the safe, warm barn. But I'd have to be one of them, so they could see and hear and understand. At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sound of the wind. He stood there listening to the bells. Listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. And he sank to his knees in the snow.

Matt 1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -- which means, "God with us."

Immanuel comes from the Hebrew words IM which means WITH and EL which means GOD. Together they mean WITH US IS GOD.

Like the story I began with, many people struggle with the idea that God became a man. So what did He do it? Why was it necessary for God to become one of us? Why did Jesus lay aside His majesty to be born in the manger?

1. That we might know God –

God became man to reveal to us what He was really like. For years God had spoken to His people through the prophets but the people had not listened to Him. There is only so much you can know about a person without actually meeting them.

Karl Barth was a famous theologian. He lived in Basel, Switzerland. One day he was on a streetcar. A tourist to the city climbed on and sat down next to him. The two men started chatting with each other. "Are you new to the city?" Barth inquired. "Yes," said the tourist. "Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?" asked Barth. "Yes," he said, "I'd love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?" Barth replied, "Well as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning." The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel saying to himself, "what luck, today I met Karl Barth's barber."

You can know a lot about a person without actually knowing or even meeting them. When I was in Kuwait it was a large church with many different congregations. Many people would come up to me and start talking like they knew me. They seemed to know all about my family and my life. They 'knew' all about me but really didn't know me at all. Likewise we can know a lot about God without truly understanding who He is. God desires a personal relationship with us.

God came to the earth as one of us to show us exactly who He is and how we are to live. It is one thing to tell a person how to do something but another thing to show them. In Jesus God came to show practically how we are to live. The goal was not just religion but relationship.

John 14:8 Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." 9 Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

2 Cor 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ

John 1:18 No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known

When we were on the Doulos we had a chance to visit Rome. There is a palace there which has a great high dome there is a painting known as "The Dawn" by Guido Reni. To see this masterpiece, a table has been placed directly beneath the dome, and on the table a mirror. When one looks down into the mirror, he sees the majestic painting far above. Is that not what the Incarnation is all about? Jesus of Nazareth is the "mirror-image" of God.

Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer once said "The best way to send an idea is to wrap it up in a person." The theological word for all of that is incarnation, meaning "in the flesh." Jesus was the incarnation of God. Jesus was the way that God sent His "idea" to humanity; there was and is no better way!

Like the little girl who said, "Some people couldn't hear God's inside whisper and so He sent Jesus to tell them out loud."

In the humanity of Jesus, God was truly speaking our language. -- John Powell

The Gospel of John says that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Word, that living expression of God, tells out loud His truth and sees to it that we are in touch with the power and glory at the heart of Creation.

A small voice penetrated the stillness of the night from the bedroom across the hall. "Daddy, I'm scared!" The father responded, "Honey, don't be afraid, Daddy's right across the hall." After a very brief pause the little voice spoke again, "I'm still scared." The father thought and again responded, "You don't need to be afraid. God is with you. God loves you." After a long pause the voice returns, "I don't care about God, Daddy; I want someone with skin on!" The logic used by the little child is precisely the reason for the Incarnation. After thousands of years of being unsuccessful in being able to convince his people that he really loved them, our Creator realized that the best way to demonstrate his love for us was to send "someone with skin on."

2. That God might know us –

A second reason that God became man was so that He might be able to identify with us. God knows everything about us – even the number of hairs on our heads. It is possible to KNOW a lot about someone but not to really UNDERSTAND who that person is.

We know that Jesus understand us and knows what we are going through because He has gone through it himself. God knows what you have been through because He went through it himself. He knows what it is to be tempted, abandoned and mistreated.

Heb 4:14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Christ did not only come into our flesh, but also into our condition, into the valley and shadow of death, where we were, and where we are, as we are sinners. -- John Bunyan

King James V of Scotland would on occasion lay aside the royal robe of king and dress as a peasant. In disguise, he could move freely about the land, making friends and entering into their difficulties, appreciating their handicaps, sympathizing with them in their sorrow. When as king he sat again upon the throne, he was better able to rule over them with fatherly compassion and mercy. God shares in human experience and thereby is better able to accept man.

Joseph Damien was a nineteenth-century missionary who ministered to people with leprosy on the island of Molokai, Hawaii. Those suffering grew to love him and revered the sacrificial life he lived out before them. One morning before Damien was to lead daily worship, he was pouring some hot water into a cup when the water swirled out and fell onto his bare foot. It took him a moment to realize that he had not felt any sensation. Gripped by the sudden fear of what this could mean, he poured more hot water on the same spot. No feeling whatsoever. Damien immediately knew what had happened. As he walked to deliver his sermon, no one at first noticed the difference in his opening line. He normally began every sermon with, "My fellow believers." But this morning he began with, "My fellow lepers." Likewise Jesus bore our sins, "For this I came into the world," he said (John 18:37).

3. That we might be saved –

The most important reason that God became man was so that He could die as the substitute for our sins. Jesus was born on earth with one main purpose – to give His life for ours.

God clothed himself in humanity so he might be weak enough to suffer. -- John Donne

Phil 2:8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -
- even death on a cross!

The Son of God became man to enable men to become the sons of God. -- C S. Lewis

He clothed himself with our lowliness in order to invest us with his grandeur. -- Richardson Wright

A grandfather found his grandson jumping up and down in his playpen, crying at the top of his voice. When Johnnie saw his grandfather, he reached up his little chubby hands and said, "Out, Gramps, out." It was only natural for the grandfather to reach down to lift him out of his predicament, but as he did the mother of the child stepped in and said "No, Johnnie, you are being punished--so you must stay in." The grandfather was at a loss to know what to do. The child's tears and chubby hands reached deep into his heart. But the mother's firmness in correcting her son must not be taken lightly. But love found a way. The grandfather could not take the grandson out of the playpen, so he climbed in with him.

That is what our Lord Jesus Christ did for us at the cross. In His justice God could not simply overlook our sins. In His love he could not let us die in them. In Christmas love and justice meet. God climbs into the world with us. The Bible says, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

Today let's take some time again to marvel at the fact that God so loved you and me that He emptied Himself of everything and entered into this world so that you could know Him, so that He could know you, and so that He could set you free.

The central message of Christmas is that each one of us has been given a special gift. What we do with that gift and what we offer in return is our gift to God. This Christmas do you have someone on your gift list that already has EVERYTHING. What can you give them? What do we give to God? God gave to each one of us the gift of Himself. That is the gift we give to Him. How do we do that? Matt 22:37-38 tells us what to give:

Matthew 22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment."

- a. God wants me to love Him thoughtfully – with our minds
- b. God wants me to love Him passionately – with our heart and soul
- c. God wants me to love Him practically – with all our strength

God created the entire universe and He created you but there are three things God does not have unless you give them to Him. He doesn't have your attention (mind) or your affection (heart) or your ability (strength) until you give them to Him.

As Christians our focus should not just Christmas but the whole year. What can you give Jesus this coming year? If you are not in a small group than I encourage you to join one.

How about taking part in a class in January. Our next set of classes starts January 12 and there are lots of great options to choose from.

One of the classes we want to highlight is our new Discipleship 201 class. This past year we have had a lot of people go through our Membership 101 class. We have 20 people being baptized January 5 and along with them 23 others coming into membership. The 201 class is designed to build upon the 101 course. It looks at developing the healthy heart habits of bible study, prayer, giving and fellowship. I want to encourage as many people as possible to take this new course.

One way to give is financially. We talked about tithing a few weeks ago. We are currently in an anniversary campaign and we want 2014 to be a year of giving. If God has been faithful to you in the last year then how about a special offering as a way of saying thanks to God for His faithfulness.

Immanuel means God with us. That baby that was born in a manger is alive and is with us this morning as the risen Christ. God is still with us in a very real sense right here and now.

Actor Kevin Bacon recounted when his 6-year-old son saw Footloose for the first time: He said, "Hey, Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you swing from the rafters of that building? That's really cool, how did you do that?" I said, "Well, I didn't do that part--it was a stunt double." "What's a stunt double?" he asked. "That's someone who dresses like me and does things I can't do." "Oh," he replied and walked out of the room looking a little confused. A little later he said, "Hey, Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you spin around on that gym bar and land on your feet? How did you do that?" I said, "Well, I didn't do that. It was a gymnastics double." "What's a gymnastics double?" he asked. "That's a guy who dresses like me and does things I can't do." There was silence from my son, then he asked in a concerned voice, "But then dad, what did you do?" "I got all the glory," I sheepishly replied.

That's the grace of God in our lives. Jesus took our sin upon himself and did what we couldn't do so that we would get the glory.