

“What Incarnation?!”

Advent 2023 – part 5

Luke 2:1-20

[1-Titles slide] Short Prayer

[2-Picture of dogs] My dad and I have many things in common. One is that our dogs, Miley and Raven, were both very skittish when we first got them. When I first tried to befriend them, no matter how calm and gentle I was, they always seemed scared of me. **[3-Eric and Raven]** I tried treats, long walks, and sneaking up on them, but whenever they saw me, their first instinct was to run over to my wife, Katja, and hide behind her. I have slightly better luck now, especially since Raven has discovered venison.

Our dogs remind me there are lots of things in this world that startle and surprise us. Loud sirens, for example. Don't you just hate it when an ambulance or firetruck blasts out of nowhere, making you jump out of your skin? Has lightning ever struck near your house, and the thunder shook the walls? The more powerful the force, the more we want to find a place to hide.

[4-Angel and Shepherds] There are a lot of times in the Christmas story when people are told, “Do not be afraid!” The angel says it to Zachariah. And to Mary. And to Joseph in a dream. And of course, the angel says it to the shepherds freaking out in the field. “Don't be afraid!” Ever notice that when someone says, “Don't be afraid,” it rarely works? Probably because whatever is happening is exactly what the person is afraid of!

Luke tells us that the “glory of the Lord shone around” the shepherds. (Luke 2:10) This is a problem. The glory of the Lord is so bright, so holy, and so awesome, that it surprises them and leaves them feeling small and vulnerable. The angel has to be very persuasive to keep the shepherds from panicking like the flocks they are supposed to protect.

We might think “the glory of the Lord” shines like a cute spotlight on a couple of cherubs in a Christmas play. But when the Bible speaks of the glory of the Lord, it's serious. Moses, for example, had to wear a veil over his face when he was exposed to God's glory. The truth is, God is so glorious and so holy that

we cannot approach him on our own. Powerful, Almighty God not only surprises us; truthfully, God’s presence scares us.

[5-Bible] The Bible tells us of a divine dilemma God finds himself in. God is love. God desires a relationship with us. God is also perfect in every way. Perfectly holy. Perfectly glorious. We humans are frail and broken. In our sinfulness, standing in the presence of God’s glory would consume us.

God, in his holiness and perfection, cannot simply ignore our sin. And we have no way to rescue ourselves. We need a Savior, someone to step in and show us the way to salvation.

[6-Sparrows, barn] Paul Harvey once told a story of a farmer who heard a thumping noise at his window one cold, snowy night. He looked outside and saw a flock of small birds freezing to death. Desperate to try to help them, he ran outside and tried to gather up the birds to take them to safety of his warm barn. He turned on the lights and opened the barn door wide. He left bread crumbs in trails leading to the barn. But the birds ignored the food and flapped helplessly in the deepening snow. He tried to catch them. He tried shooping them in by waving his arms. Nothing worked.

The farmer then realized that 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 that they can trust me...That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how?...”

“If only I could be a bird,” he thought to himself, “and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear and understand.”¹

[7-Woman alone] In contrast to God’s glory, there are times when the world seems very dark and cold. There are many things we weary of: anger, greed, hatred, regret, violence, depression, loneliness. God never intended for us to experience these things, yet we go back to them over and over again, like the sparrows in the cold.

¹ www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/christmas_classics_the_man_and_the_birds_by_paul_harvey

The truth is, we want to be saved. We want to escape the hurt and sorrow. We want to see an end to sin, destruction, and death. We want our relationships to be healed. God sees all of this, and God knew, by becoming like one of us, he could lead us to safety. On the first Christmas, God entered our world as a baby, so as not to “startle us.” God chose to step into our lives. We call it the Incarnation.

[8-Title slide] My message has a double meaning. “What Incarnation?” In one sense, the Incarnation needs to be explained. God became flesh – incarnate – in order to save the world. But there is a second meaning – “What Incarnation?!” Sort of like the old-fashioned saying, “What in tarnation?!” It is an exclamation of surprise. As in, “Wow, God became human?! How does that make sense?” This gift of God is completely unexpected.

[9-Quotes] Hundreds of years ago, the great theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote about the surprising nature of God’s gift of the Incarnation. In one way, he said, the Incarnation was not necessary for God to save us. There were other ways for God to save the world. After all, God can do anything. However, the Incarnation was the best way to save us.² Or, as another great writer, Augustine, put it, “there was not a more fitting way of healing our misery.”³

We cannot save ourselves. We need the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus lived here on earth, yet was perfectly righteous and holy. He was the only one who could save us. And he died on a cross, willingly, because he loves us.

[10-Manger] There are a lot of things about Christmas that seem impossible to believe. The virgin birth. The star in the sky. But the most incredible to me is that Jesus was both fully human and fully God. This has been a source of wonder for two thousand years. Even one of my favorite songs has this line: “How much heaven and how much earth were in this baby at his birth?”⁴ The answer is: all of them.

[11-Jesus] Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Two natures in one person. They existed together, in the same place and same time, in one

² “The fitness of the Incarnation.” <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/4001.htm>

³ “Question 46. The passion of Christ” <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/4046.htm#>

⁴ Todd Agnew, “Did You Know”

wonderful package. Not stuck together, like two Lego blocks. God and man existed in complete unity in Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is surprising. It is confusing. And it is wonderful.

Does Christmas still surprise you? Does the wonder of the Incarnation leave you trembling? Do you even have a glimmer of what it cost Jesus to live among us, to suffer for us, to die and be raised back to life? How great was his love that he would willingly depart the glory of heaven and enter into our world!

[12-Christmas presents] Christmas is full of the things we love. We love the carols. We love the candles. We love the presents. We love cookies and eggnog! In this busy time, it is so easy to forget the true reason for the season is the Incarnation. That’s why we need two worship services on this day. Tonight we celebrate the gift of salvation made available to all.

[13-manger and cross] I pray earnestly that Jesus Christ surprises you. I pray that you will know him the way the shepherds and wise men knew him. They beheld the wonder of it all. I pray you will know Jesus the way his disciples knew him, as Master, Savior, and Lord. This might not be your first Christmas, but it might be the first Christmas you truly open up your heart to the one who is the King of Kings, the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us. This evening, you are invited into a story of wonder and surprise. You are given an invitation to the banquet of the Incarnate Word, Jesus.

You don’t have to be afraid of God. You don’t have to run and hide. You don’t have to stay out in the darkness and cold, outside of the love God has for you. Tonight, as we celebrate communion and light the candles, let this be your chance to fully embrace the life God has for you, to turn from your sin and enter into a new life with Christ.

[Regular slideshow, Communion]

Communion. Ask ushers to come forward. Explain all are welcome at Christ’s table. Explain God forgives us in Jesus’ name.

Words of invocation: On the night he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and passed it to his disciples with these words: “Take, eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

At the end of the meal, he took the cup, gave thanks to God, and passed it to his disciples with these words. “Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood, poured for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Prayer: Mighty God, Author of Salvation, pour out your Holy Spirit of these people gathered here tonight, and on these gifts of bread and juice. Make them be the body and blood of Christ for us, as we may be the body of Christ to the world, united in his love. May the Savior live in us, and may we proclaim his salvation to the world. All glory and honor to belongs to you, God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Serve ushers first. Have them serve me. Return the elements to the table.
Katja comes up with candles. Request the lights to be dimmed. Pass the flame to the ushers, who take it to the pews. Remind people to be careful.*

Christmas blessing:

As we hold these candles aloft, it is a reminder that no matter how dark the world may seem, darkness must always give way to light. John said the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. That light of the world is the Savior, Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. May Christ shine his truth into your hearts and into your lives. Merry Christmas.

*Request lights back on, musicians come up. Blow out candles carefully.
Move to piano. Sing “Unspeakable Joy.”*

Memory Verse: John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever worked with a child or a pet that was afraid of you? What did you do to reassure them?
2. What part of the Christmas story is most amazing to you?
3. Are you surprised that Jesus temporarily gave up heaven for us?
4. Would you give your heart to Jesus and let him save you?