

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

What does Christmas mean? Last night we listened to the beautiful Christmas story. No story like this has ever been told. I once instructed a young woman who was about eighteen years old. She knew almost nothing about the Christian faith. I don't think she even heard Charlie Brown recite the Christmas story in the Charlie Brown special. You would think that everyone has heard the Christmas story, but that's just not true anymore. When have you last heard the Christmas story told anywhere but in church? I read the Christmas story to her and her eyes welled up with tears and she said, "That's so beautiful. I have never heard that story before."

Everyone loves to hear the Christmas story written by Luke. You never grow tired of hearing that story. Luke was a historian who interviewed people who were intimately connected with Jesus. It's obvious that he interviewed Mary and got her memories of that wonderful night. The anxiety of searching for a room. The disappointment that no one made room for them. The beauty of that night, shared with animals in a stable, with her husband, and with a bunch of shepherds. She pondered all these things and kept them in her heart. You couldn't make up such a wonderful story if you tried. Mary never forget that night.

But what does it mean? What does Christmas mean? What does the birth of Jesus mean? I know this reading for John 1 seems far less romantic and far more theological, but it really tells us what Christmas and the birth of Jesus means.

WHAT DOES CHRISTMAS MEAN?

II. God became a child

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. This is an unusual name for Jesus. John calls Jesus "the Word," and he says that the Word is God and that the Word became flesh and lived among us. The Christmas story is not just about a baby born in a manger, it is about GOD being born in a manger. It's about a baby being fully human and fully God at the same time.

John calls Jesus the Word made flesh. Words are important. If you met someone and never talked to them, you really couldn't say that you know them. Through their words, you hear their stories. You find out where they grew up, what they experienced. You hear their thoughts and opinions. If you have coffee with someone every morning, you really get to know that person well. I had coffee with my wife about thirty times before I ever asked her out. I got to know her first. In the same way, God has spoken to

us in his Word, the Bible. We know who God is. We know God's thoughts. We know where God stands.

So why does John call Jesus the Word? The writer to the Hebrews expresses it in this way. **"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."** By becoming a child, God showed us his person and his personality in a very special way. Jesus is not just a textbook. He is the living Word, the Word made flesh. God has revealed himself to us by putting skin when he entered our world.

John says that he **"made his dwelling among us."** The Greek literally says that he made his tent, or his tabernacle, among us. Do you remember the story of the children of Israel wandering around in the desert for forty years? Whenever, they stopped, they would put up the tabernacle. In that tabernacle there was a closed room, shut off by a thick curtain. God's glory, that pillar of fire and smoke that led them through desert, would descend on the tabernacle and be hidden in the most holy place. The people knew that God was really present with them, but God could not show them his glory, because it would have killed them.

Do you see what that means? If Jesus is the Word made flesh and the radiance of God's glory, then God has shown himself to us in Jesus. He has revealed his glory to us in a way that will not destroy us. When Jesus turned over the money tables in the temple and drove out the animals, don't you see God in that story? When Jesus became angry when his disciples wanted to keep the children from coming to him, don't you see God's heart in that story? When Jesus invited himself to enter the house of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, do you see God in that story? If you want to know God, then read your gospels and look at Jesus! The fact that God became a child means that God has revealed himself to us in a very special way.

What else does this mean when we see that God became a child? It means that God became vulnerable. In Isaiah 9 the Christ is called Wonderful Counselor. You have a God in heaven who understands you more than you know. He shared your human experience. On this Christmas Day there are people who are sitting in their houses all alone, because they have nowhere to go and no one to come to see them. Or maybe they are in a jail cell somewhere, punished for crimes they committed. Can you imagine how lonely that must feel? Probably not because you have probably never experienced such loneliness. Jesus knows how that feels. When they threw him into the holding cell in Caiaphas's house, he was all alone. Psalm 88 ends with these words, "Darkness is my only friend." I believe that Psalm was meant for Jesus. His friends fled. His family could not come to see him. Do you know what a wonderful counselor Jesus is to people who are alone?

Have you ever been homeless? Imagine how that must feel this Christmas Day. Jesus was homeless. Foxes of holes and birds have nests, but the Son of God had no place to rest his head. Have you ever been bullied in your life? So was Jesus. The soldiers put a crown of thorns on his head and mocked him. They spit on him and hit him with their fists. Have you ever been betrayed by a friend? So was Jesus. Judas spent three years with Jesus and betrayed him with a kiss for 30 pieces of silver. Do you know what it is like to face death? Maybe you do. If you don't, someday you will. It's o.k. to be afraid of death. So was Jesus. He knew he would end up in his Father's arms, but the thought of dying on the cross filled him with dread. Jesus prayed so hard in the garden the night before he died. The fact that God became a child means that you have such a friend in Jesus and that he is your wonderful counselor.

The fact that God became a child means that he was more than vulnerable. He became killable. John says, **"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only."** That phrase is not used often. God made a point of using that same phrase when he asked Abraham to sacrifice his "one and only" son, whom he loved. No one can bear to lose a child. But to lose your one and only child is a grief almost unimaginable. That day on the mountain, when Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son, God spared him that pain. God did not spare himself that pain. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Do you want to know how much God loves you? The Christmas story tells you.

I had a professor at the seminary, Dr. Siegbert Becker, who could recite Romans 8, all of it, without a pause. He shared with us an event that left a lasting mark on his life. The first Christmas in the ministry is always hard for a pastor, especially if you are the only pastor. You preach on Sunday and then on Christmas Eve and then on Christmas Day. Late Christmas Eve, he sat down to write his sermon for Christmas day. He worked into the early morning hours. Before he went to bed he looked in on his six month old son, sleeping in a crib. When he touched his face, he realized that his son had died. Telling this story to us forty years later, he wept and said, "That night I understood what it meant for my heavenly Father on Christmas Eve. I had an inkling of how much God loved me."

The Christmas story is not just a nice story for Charlie Brown to recite. It's the story of God becoming a child, becoming vulnerable and killable. It's about God becoming our Savior, about God the Father loving us with a love we can't hardly imagine because it takes our breath away. And even more, the Christmas story is about you becoming God's child.

II. You have become God's child

John tells us what Christmas means for you, personally. **"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."** How can this be? How can you ever be God's child? How can I ever be God's child?

First, you weren't born that way. Your natural descent means that you were born of sinful parents. You inherited the sin that Adam and Eve committed in the garden, the original sin. The Bible says that you were born in sin and conceived in iniquity (Psalm 51.5). When Adam gave birth to Seth, the Bible says that Seth was born in Adam's image, in Adam's likeness. You inherited from your parents the stain of sin. You were not born children of God.

You were not born of a human decision. You didn't sit down and figure this out for yourselves. In fact, sometimes our human intelligence works against us. We listen to the philosophers of our age. We listen to the poets who sing their songs. We listen to college professors who tell us we are just piles of dirt and no better. Jesus once set a child in his lap and told his disciples that unless they believed like a little child, they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. Don't misunderstand what Jesus was saying. A child cannot make a human decision to believe in Jesus either. It's just that sometimes as adults we have so much other garbage on our minds that it's even more impossible for us to believe.

John also says that you are not born of a husband's will. You can't force anyone to believe. That's important to remember at this time of the year. Maybe you have a relative, a son or daughter or a brother or sister, that does not believe in Jesus. Don't think that you can shame them into believing. "What would mom and dad say if they were alive?" You can't bribe them into believing. "If you go to church with us tonight, we can open our presents and pretend we are a happy family again." I've never seen that work. Have you?

What does it take for someone to believe? It takes a miracle of God. **"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."** That miracle of God takes place when people hear the story that started on that first Christmas night. Really, the story began already in the garden of Eden, when God first promised a Savior. The Word (the Bible) and the Word made flesh (Jesus) speak to our hearts in a powerful way that can make believers out of children and skeptics and agnostics and atheists.

As much as it is humanly possible to see that miracle take place in someone's heart, I have seen it happen on more than one occasion. Terry was a skeptic that I invited to my Bible information class. He warned me that he wasn't going to be an easy student. "I like to ask the hard questions. I just want to warn you." I invited him to ask all the questions he wanted, and he did. I answered them from the Bible. About the fifth or sixth lesson, I notice that his questions changed. He still asked the questions, but now he would start by saying, "Where does it say in the Bible ...?" He stopped being a skeptic and started being a learner. I'm not sure he even understood what happened to him! The point is that faith is nothing less than a miracle of God through his powerful Word and through the Word made flesh.

But I don't have to sell you on how powerful the Word (the Bible) and the Word made flesh (Jesus) is. You have experienced that miracle in your hearts. You have come here this morning to hear the message that renews your hearts every Christmas. You have come to feed your faith on the good news story of your salvation. You have come to take the bread and wine that Jesus gives you in the sacrament, because with it he gives you his body and his blood and the forgiveness of sins.

What does Christmas mean? It means God has become a child so that you can be called the children of God by faith in him. Amen.