

In the Flesh  
John 1:1–18  
Thursday, December 24, 2020

When I was growing up, my family had a standard routine for Christmas each year. On Christmas Eve, we would go to the 5:00 candlelight service at church. After that, we would go to my mother's parents' house for dinner with my grandparents and aunt and uncle and cousins, and we would all exchange gifts. On Christmas morning we would wake up and do Christmas at our house with my mom and dad and brother. Then we would go over to my *dad's* parents' house and do Christmas with my *other* grandparents and aunt and uncle and cousins. We would stay there for the rest of the day and have our big family Christmas dinner together, while all day my grandfather played Bing Crosby Christmas records and my grandmother drank the wine that she was supposed to be cooking with. For 24 years, that was how I celebrated Christmas, and my memories of Christmas are just *saturated* with images of that time together with my family; the sights and sounds and smells and *feeling* of being together.

And I remember the first Christmas that I spent away from home. It was 2003, and Jen and I had just gotten married a month earlier. I was working in a church out in Limerick, so it was the first Christmas Eve that I had to help *lead* worship instead of just attending. So we stayed up here instead of going down to Florida, and we did Christmas with Jen's family. They welcomed me into *their* traditions, and it was such a fun, new time together.

But at one point that day, I remember calling my dad to wish him a merry Christmas, and he was at my grandparents' house for the big family gathering. I could hear all the noise and laughter and music in the background, and then he passed the phone around to my grandparents and aunt and uncle. I could close my eyes and picture where they all were and what they were doing. And while it was so good to hear their voices, there was a part of me that really felt like I was

missing out. I felt *disconnected* and *distant* from this gathering and the people who had been my sole memories of Christmas since I was born.

I would imagine that a lot of us are having similar experience *this* year. Our Christmas plans and traditions have been disrupted, and we can't be together with all the people that we want to share this day with. (I mean, this is the first time in my life that I haven't been together with my church family on Christmas Eve.) And while we will all find creative ways to be together with our loved ones tonight and tomorrow – phone calls, Facetime, Zoom meetings – there is something about being *physically present together* on Christmas – hugging, laughing, eating, the music playing, and the *energy* and *feeling* in the room – that just can't be replicated virtually.

I think that's one of the most important things we have learned through this year of pandemic and distancing – the importance of *physical presence*. Of *being with*. We are longing for *togetherness* this year in a way that maybe we never have before. And it's *because* of that that I think this year has actually prepared us to experience and understand the essence of Christmas in a way that we never have before. Because at its core, Christmas is all about *physical presence* and *being with*.

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God tried the whole virtual option. Facetime and Zoom might not have been around yet, but God found *other ways* to *be with* people. At first it was things like burning bushes, pillars of fire, and booming voices. But that just *scared* people. Then it was prophets, people who represented God and spoke for God. But no one really listened to them; they kind of thought they were crazy. Then God tried texting and had some success with that; the *written* Word. All these efforts at *virtual* presence. That's what virtual presence *is*, right? You're *with* somebody, but you're not *really there with* them. You're still distant, removed. And like we have discovered

that that is not *enough* for us, it wasn't enough for *God* either. It's like the book of Hebrews says, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways...but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." The "many and various ways" of virtual presence weren't enough, so God came *near*, came *here*, *with us*.

Just over 1,600 years ago, in the year 386 AD, a priest in Turkey named John Chrysostom preached what is believed to be the first Christmas sermon. There may have been others before that, but this is the oldest one we know about. It was only about five minutes long, and in it he said this, "The Only Begotten, who is before all ages, who cannot be touched or perceived, who is without body, has now put on *my* body...For since men believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so God has deigned to show himself in bodily presence, that He may remove all doubt....The Ancient of Days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly throne, now lies in a manger. And He who cannot be touched...now lies subject to the hands of men....God is now on earth...He became flesh."

What was once invisible has become visible. What was once intangible has become tangible. What was once removed and remote has come near. What was once virtual has become *physical...real*. God has come to us, not in a pillar of fire or a booming voice, not in some other person or a book. *God has come to us, in the flesh*.

As John says it in his gospel, "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." What was once only *spoken* or *written* is now *living* and *breathing*, so that human beings have *seen* with their *own eyes* the very glory and grace and truth of God. When scripture was translated into Latin,

the word that they used for this, for the Word becoming flesh, was the word *incarnare* – *in flesh*. It's where we get the word *incarnate* or *incarnation*. It's the idea – the *reality* – that God has come *in the flesh* to live life with us. To walk with us and talk with us. To laugh with us and cry with us. To touch and see and hear and smell and taste and *feel* with us. To understand what it's like to be human – the joy and the pain and the hope and the fear and the love and the loneliness and the longing that we experience. That is now a part of the life of God.

The Jewish people gave this incarnation a *name*: Emmanuel, God is with us. And the early Christians said of this, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them, and they will be God's people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.” The God who created heaven and earth has become a *part* of that creation for no other reason than to be *with* us and *know* us so that *we* could know *God* and know that we are not alone and live life with God, now and forever.

John said that the Word became flesh so that we could become *children of God*, who live not by the will of the flesh or our own will but by the will of God. As John Chrysostom said 1,600 years ago, “He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares me for the treasure of life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me his Spirit, that He may save me...Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle.”

At its heart, that is what Christmas is about. God has broken down the barrier between heaven and earth, between human and divine, between the spiritual and the physical, by coming to us *in the flesh*. God realized the importance of *physical presence*; that there are some things that just can't be done virtually.

Christmas is about *being with, in the flesh*. And that's why this Christmas is so hard for so many of us. Because we *can't* do that. We are limited in our ability to *be with* one another. So what I would say to you is, whoever you *can* be with tonight, tomorrow, in the flesh, treasure that. Don't take it for granted. Celebrate it. Give thanks to God for that physical presence as an expression of incarnation, of *God's* very presence with you.

And whoever you *can't* be with this year, whoever you are missing or longing for, you are not alone. God is *with* you. God knows that longing. Because God longed for us for *thousands* of years, searching for ways to *be with* us. And scripture says that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son." When the time was right, God came to be present with us. And so for us, when the time is right, we will be present with each other again. But until then, we continue to watch and wait and hope and long for the coming of that glorious dawn where God shines the light of his presence into the darkness of this world and our lives, and comes again to be with his people, making all things, even us, new. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.