

Seeing God in the Flesh

A sermon in the 2020 Advent Sermon Series “Christmas Basics”

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- John 1:1-5, 14 Good News Translation In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²From the very beginning the Word was with God. ³Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. ⁴The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.... ¹⁴The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son.
- Philippians 2:5-11 The Message translation ⁵⁻⁸ Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion. ⁹⁻¹¹ Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

Our observance of the seasons of Advent and Christmas this year will be different from any other year. Oh, we'll certainly maintain some traditions here at the church, like lighting candles on an Advent wreath and putting up some Christmas decorations. But other traditions like hearing favorite Christmas carols and holding a candle while singing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve are beloved practices that will have to take place in comfort and safety of your home.

In the Broadway musical based on the comic strip character Little Orphan Annie, the show closes with a song called “A New Deal for Christmas.” Just as the global pandemic has cast a shadow over our holiday celebrations *this* year, our nation's Great Depression cast a pall over our nation at that time. The cast of “Annie” sings

I know the Depression's depressing
The carols are stilled
The stores aren't filled
And the windows are minus the dressing
The children don't grin
The Santa's are thin
And I've heard a terrible rumor
No goodwill no cheer

But we'll get a new deal for Christmas
This year¹

In this year when many celebrations are stripped of familiar traditions, I thought that a “new deal” for us during this unique year would be to reflect on the basics of Christianity’s celebration of Christmas. What messages should we take from the Nativity and what messages should we share because of it?

Last week we observed that, at root, one of the most basic messages of the Christmas event is that God returns to us. We heard that clearly in the writing of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah who conveyed the word of the Lord in proclaiming, “Return to me, and I will return to you.”² Today let’s consider a word that we often hear at Christmastime, a word whose significance we might not always grasp: that word is “incarnation.”

To begin to understand the significance of “incarnation,” let me tell you about three prominent people who knew that they needed to stay in touch with the average guy or gal.

When Abraham Lincoln was in the White House, it was established practice that anyone could come into the White House in hopes of having a face-to-face with the President. Perhaps they sought a pardon or a favor, or they wanted a political or judicial appointment, or they wanted to advocate for legislation or give the President their advice on his management of the Civil War. Mr. Lincoln would receive visitors for three hours every weekday – an hour less on the two days he met with his Cabinet.³ It was an exhausting aspect of his job, and yet Mr. Lincoln would have it no other way. Reflecting on his daily interactions with the average citizens Lincoln is reported to have said

Many of the matters brought to my notice are utterly frivolous, but others are of more or less importance, and all serve to renew in me a clearer and more vivid image of that great popular assemblage out of which I sprung, and to which at the end of two years I must return.... I tell you that I call these receptions my “public-opinion baths;” for... though they may not be pleasant in all their particulars, the effect, as a whole, is renovating and invigorating to my perceptions of responsibility and duty.⁴

Even as a resident of the White House, Lincoln craved the ability to remain in touch with the average citizen.

Second, there’s another former president who continues to deliberately connect with the American people on a regular basis. It’s well known that the 39th President of

¹ “New Deal for Christmas” from *Annie: the Musical*. Music by Charles Strouse, Lyrics by Martin Charnin, at <http://www.themusicallyrics.com/a/26-annie-musical-lyrics/1173-new-deal-for-christmas-lyrics.html> accessed 11/25/2020

² Zechariah 1:3

³ Don E. and Virginia Fehrenbacher, editors, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 194 at <http://www.mrlincolnwhitehouse.org/the-white-house/upstairs-at-the-white-house/upstairs-white-house-mr-lincolns-office/mr-lincolns-office-visitors/> accessed 11/25/2020

⁴ Don E. and Virginia Fehrenbacher, editors, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 194 at <http://www.mrlincolnwhitehouse.org/the-white-house/upstairs-at-the-white-house/upstairs-white-house-mr-lincolns-office/mr-lincolns-office-visitors/> accessed 11/25/2020

the United States Jimmy Carter teaches a Sunday school class at his church, Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. Now at age 96, Carter has changed from teaching weekly to leading the class roughly twice a month. The church of about thirty members will average about 200 in attendance for Carter's Bible-based class. People arrive in pre-dawn hours in order to get a seat in the sanctuary of the church. After the class Carter takes the time to greet anyone who wishes to meet him; he and Rosalynn also graciously pose for photos for all who want one.

Carter feels a spiritual calling to teach the Bible, yes. But he also wants to stay in touch with the diverse people of the country he has served, both in the Navy as well as through various levels of government. He ends every class "by challenging class members to do one nice thing for somebody over the next month."⁵ That's one way that a person who once occupied the most powerful office in the world remains connected with those who he was once responsible for.

Third, Dolly Parton. Who *doesn't* know who Dolly Parton is? She is a country music star, a pop music star, a TV star, a movie star. She is a prolific songwriter, venue-filling performer, a giant in the recording industry, a Broadway composer, owner of many successful businesses.

Parton grew up in eastern Tennessee's rural Sevier County where the literacy rate was low. As was the case for many in that time and place, widespread poverty meant that, as a boy, her own father had to go to work rather than going to school, so he never learned to read and write. To address her home county's low literacy rate, Parton started the Imagination Library, first just for Sevier County, but now it's expanded to 1,400 counties all over the United States, Canada and Australia.

Through this program... [new mothers] will receive a free [children's] book, and children will get a free book each month until they are 5 years old. Studies show that kids who have books in their home, regardless of race, class, or social status, will be more educated than those who don't.⁶

What else has she done while also writing and recording hit records? In the early weeks of the pandemic, Parton began a weekly series on Facebook where she would read a children's bedtime stories.⁷ Parton organized a Buddy Program for middle school students that succeeded in greatly reducing the high school drop-out rate in Sevier County. She was a force behind an effort that built a new medical center in that area.⁸ Oh, and out of concern for the natural environment Parton opened Eagle Mountain Sanctuary, the country's largest bald eagle reservation.⁹ The glitter and glamour of Nashville and New York and Hollywood didn't keep Dolly Parton from caring about and connecting with people everywhere, whether in the Great Smoky Mountains or the outback of Australia.

⁵ Jay Reeves, "Still teaching at 95, Jimmy Carter draws devotees to church." November 11, 2019 Associated Press at <https://apnews.com/article/e0fb39dc916d48c1a8fa5bf72f5deb32> accessed 11/25/2020

⁶ <https://littlethings.com/lifestyle/dolly-parton-imagination-library> accessed 12/2/2020

⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/31/entertainment/dolly-parton-bedtime-stories-trnd/index.html#:~:text=The%20nine%2Dtime%20Grammy%20winner,mails%20free%20books%20to%20children> accessed 12/2/2020

⁸ <https://theboot.com/dolly-parton-charity-work/> accessed 12/2/2020

⁹ <https://www.vulture.com/2020/11/dolly-parton-vaccine-donation-history.html> accessed 12/2/2020

As the stories of Lincoln and Carter and Parton indicate, there can be a drive in the hearts of some powerful, accomplished, influential people – a need to stay in touch with the average guy or gal.

Christmas is God's act of choosing to stay in touch with everyday people and everyday life. The eternal, invisible, omnipresent, holy God chose to come among us, taking on human form, taking on human flesh. As we heard from the opening of the Gospel of John, in that space before God created time and space, the power of the Word was *with* God and indeed *was* God. John declared, "The Word became a human being and, full of [divine] grace and truth, lived among us."¹⁰ God-in-flesh: incarnation.

St. Paul described the incarnation this way in his letter to the Philippians:

When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death...."¹¹

...Incarnation. Emmanuel. God-With-Us.

As God's creatures, as God's creation, throughout history we've certainly tried God's patience, disappointed God, saddened God. But even in those times of testing and disappointment, God has loved us nonetheless.

The unique, unparalleled message of Christmas is an announcement of incarnation. In the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem God has come among us, taking on human flesh to show us how to live a godly life.

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¹⁰ John 1:14 Good News Translation

¹¹ Philippians 2:5-8 The Message