

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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The Word Became Flesh

John 1:1-14 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being [4] in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

[6] There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [7] He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. [8] He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. [9] The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

[10] He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. [12] But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, [13] who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

[14] And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

CHRISTMAS VACATION

What do you hope to get this Christmas?

One of my favorite movies answers that question. It's National Lampoon's "Christmas Vacation" starring Chevy Chase.

Chevy as Clark Griswald wants more than anything else to have a good, old fashioned Christmas at home. (You know the kind of Christmas I'm talking about. It's the Christmas you remember, but never actually had!)

Clark is looking forward to seeing long lost family members. He's looking forward to using his Christmas bonus to build a swimming pool in his back yard.

He's looking forward to putting up a live Christmas tree with all the trimmings. He's looking forward to having the most extensive collection of Christmas lights in the entire neighborhood ... joy to his world.

But, those of you who have seen the movie know that things didn't work out so well for poor Clark. His relatives are the strangest group of misfits you have ever seen. His boss decides not to give out any Christmas bonuses (after Clark had already paid for the pool from money he expected to receive).

The live Christmas tree is ruined by an angry squirrel that was there first and finished off by a relative who is not too careful with his smoking habits.

And that expensive light show? It falls prey to poor wiring and takes out the lights all over town.

In short, everything that can go wrong does go wrong. Poor Clark never gets what he hopes for.

Now I'm sure none of you have ever had a Christmas like this. Or maybe you have. Perhaps that's why that movie is so funny. We recognize ourselves in this yearly struggle. Sometimes our Christmas dreams become a nightmare.

THE PLACE FOR GOOD NEWS

I'm sure that there are quite a few families who had hoped for more out of Christmas this year. But, it just isn't working out. The economy isn't cooperating. Many of us are afraid. If you're looking for good news this year, CNN is definitely not place to go.

But, if you have come here looking for some good news tonight, you've come to the right place. We specialize in good news and tonight of all nights the news is especially good.

The "good tidings of great joy" are brought to us by angels from upon high. They tell us that there's no need to be afraid.

The Word of God has become flesh. God himself is with us. The One He sends will bring us exactly what we need, the gifts of peace justice and good will.

I know you asked for something else this Christmas. Many of us were hoping for something a little more practical ... like a Christmas bonus.

But, this is not the gift that God gives. God gives us a gift that is in some ways strange and unexpected. It is the gift of His presence.

I like that take off on the Hallmark card slogan.
God cared enough to send the very best.

He sent his Son, a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger. What a strange and wonderful gift.

THE UNEXPECTED GIFT

Most of us know all about strange and unexpected gifts. Have you ever received a gift that was totally unexpected and perhaps even unwanted? You may even have asked as you opened it, "What is this thing?" Maybe you thought about putting it into the "re-gifting" pile.

But, for some reason you kept it, and as you used the gift you began to realize, “Wow, this is the greatest thing since sliced bread. I wish I would’ve had one of these things a long time ago.”

We had no desire for this thing. But, we discover that someone knew us better than we knew ourselves. They gave us exactly what we needed.

In a much more profound way this is what happened when Jesus came into the world. He was not the gift that people expected.

One commentator put it this way, “Jesus was the hope of the world, but he wasn’t the hope for which the world was hoping!” John simply said, “... his own people did not accept him.”

Jesus was the gift that no one wanted. But, he was exactly what we needed. He proclaimed a peace that was more than just the absence of gunfire. He proclaimed a peace that was based upon the glory and presence of God.

And tonight I proclaim that same message again.

God is with us here and now in the very place where we live. God is with us here and now where things don’t work as they should. God is with us here and now where our fears threaten to overwhelm us.

THE GIFT OF PRESENCE

Don’t ever underestimate the gift of presence. Some of us know how precious that gift can be.

Some of us know what it is like to be in the hospital and then be cheered by the presence of one who cares. Some of us know what it is like to be overwhelmed by grief and yet find comfort from the presence of one who weeps with us.

Some of us know what it is like to have a son or daughter return home unexpectedly during the holidays. The gift of presence makes all the difference when it comes to our friends and loved ones.

Shouldn’t it make an even greater difference when it comes to our Lord and God? That’s the good news of Christmas. We are not alone. God himself is with us, and his presence transforms us.

THE KING VISITS

The story is told of an ancient king who was very concerned about the welfare of his people. One day he decided to visit some of the homes of the peasants.

But, word came back to the king that the peasants were very upset. Their dwellings were quite humble, and they didn't have the means to properly entertain the king.

So, the king ordered that each home to be visited should be filled with the best food, furniture and servants. The humble cottages were transformed into a palace where even the poorest peasant could rejoice and talk freely with his king.

This is a parable of what Jesus did when he became flesh and lived among us. The most humble person who welcomes Jesus finds that their life is transformed by the presence of the king.

As we read in our lesson from John, "But, to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God ..."

MUST ACCEPT THE GIFT

You may have noticed that in order to be changed by the presence of God there is just one thing that we have to do. We have to receive him. We have to accept the gift that God gives us this Christmas.

Why wouldn't we accept him? Who would be foolish enough to reject the Son of God, the Word made flesh?

Actually, as we mentioned before God's own people rejected him the first time, and I suspect that "religious" people of all stripes still reject him today.

Jesus is still not the gift we expect or even want. There's a reason for that. His presence is not only a comfort to the afflicted but also an affliction to the comfortable. His presence is not just a revelation of the glory of heaven; it is also an insistence upon bringing about peace and justice down to earth.

To put it another way this gift comes with the expectation that we share it with others.

It's like when you get those big boxes of Christmas cookies and candies. If we don't share them freely with others, we'll regret it in the end.

In the same way the greatest gift of Christmas is meant to be shared. We share the presence of Christ by letting the Word become flesh in our own lives. We do the will of the Heavenly Father and become more Christ like in our actions.

If we believe the good news we will be bringers of good news. If we believe the light has shone in the darkness, we too will let our lights shine.

EXPECTING LITTLE?

I like the way our prayer of confession that we used tonight put it. We have not “trusted good news to be good. We have closed our eyes to glory in our midst, expecting little and hoping for less.”

That last phrase seems like a good definition of doubt, “expecting little and hoping for less.”

If we believe the king lives among us, we expect more instead of less. If we believe that the king lives among us, we have hope for today. If we believe that the word became flesh, then we must believe that there is also hope for tomorrow.

In our daily lives we must learn to look for glimpses of glory. We must allow our belief about God to transform how we live today. We must allow the heavenly vision of hope to transform our attitudes and your actions.

One of the things that I really like about the Christmas season is that it somehow creates the expectation that the world should be different. Even those who have little or no faith seem to accept the idea that at Christmas things should change.

Like Clark Griswald of Christmas Vacation fame we have an idealized vision of what Christmas should be. Some of what we wish for is simply sentimental. Some of what we wish for is foolish and selfish.

But, somehow the hope and glory manage to cut through all the blarney every year. Somehow the mystery and the majesty shine through. The darkness of the world is great, but the light that shines in the darkness is greater still.

NEVER BEEN BORN?

Another one of my favorite Christmas movies is an old one, Jimmy Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful Life.” In this movie he plays a man who stands to lose everything due to a failing business. He contemplates suicide. He thinks that the world would have been better off if he had never been born.

But, through the help of his angel he gets to see what the world would have looked like if he had never been born.

And he concludes that the world is indeed better off because he lived. Indeed he has been the source of great good. The world would have been much different, a much darker place had he never lived.

That movie got me to thinking, “What would it be like if Jesus had not been born?”

If we could envision such a thing, perhaps we could appreciate Christmas a little better. There would be no celebration of Christmas of course. There would be no bright lights or parties. There would be no gift giving.

But, more importantly, there would be no salvation. There would be no forgiveness of sins. Oppressive rule would never be questioned. Cries of pain would not be answered.

Death would be the final enemy.

In short, the world would be a very lonely, dark place.

LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

Of course you could rightly point out that some places are like that today. There are indeed places where the darkness is very dark indeed. But, we are called to stand as a beacon of hope in this dark world. We believe that the kingdom will come, but the final battle has not been won.

But, on the other hand, we have read the final chapter, and we know how the book will end. When the final trumpet sounds darkness will not win. The light will overcome the darkness. Heaven will come down to earth once and for all. There will be no more night in that Holy City, and peace shall reign forever and ever.

In the meantime we believe that the light of Christ is in the world today. A light still shines in our darkness.

This is a light that cannot be extinguished by those that oppose it or do not believe in it. In fact the harder they try to snuff out this light the brighter the light becomes.

Not too long ago psychologists discovered that light is essential for our mental health. In the winter months some people became depressed from that lack of light. They call this affliction Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD for short.

The cure was amazingly simple: order a bank of specially designed lights and spend some time in the light. Stepping in the light is the cure.

And it seems to me that the same is true for what ails us spiritually. We need to step in the light.

There are many lights in our traditional celebration of Christmas. There is the warm glow of candlelight. There is the light of our beautiful Christmas trees. We can go to Disney and be dazzled by thousands of lights jumping in time to lively music.

GLORY

But, none of these lights, as bright and brilliant as they are, can hold a candle to the one true light.

The light we need is a unique light. The light we need is the one light present at creation. The light we need is the very presence of God as revealed in his Son, Jesus through the power of the Spirit.

We have a special name for this light. The Bible calls this light glory.

The Bible tells us that it was the glory of the Lord that shone around those first shepherds when they heard the good news. The glory was so great that the shepherds were “sore afraid” ... or to put it in modern English, they were scared out of their wits. When our eyes have become accustomed to the dark, the bright light of God’s presence can be a very frightening experience.

But, the shepherds were not left alone in their fear. The angels interpreted the light for them. It was the light of creation and the light of revelation; it was the glory of the Lord. The shepherds would never be the same after they saw that light, and the world would never be the same either.

We can close our eyes to the light. We can suggest that the light doesn’t exist. But, that will not stop the light from shining.

There can be no more business as usual after the birth of Jesus, God’s own Son. His kingdom is still coming, and his will is still being done on earth as it is in heaven.

He was the one child who changed the world forever.