

JESUS WALKED IN OUR SHOES

4th Sunday in Advent

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John 1:1-3 & 14

INTRODUCTION

Several weeks ago, our president was in Amman, Jordan to meet with the president of Iraq, a meeting hosted by the king of Jordan, King Abdullah II. It brought to mind something I'd read seven years ago in a news report about Jordan's king liking to go undercover among his people. I'm not sure if he continues doing this, but at that time his practice was to disguise himself in old worn-out clothes and go out among his people to assess and hear about their needs twice every week. One day, he posed as a taxi driver to hear the complaints of his countrymen. At one point, he even stopped to ask traffic police for directions, then mingled among them discussing with them various traffic problems they faced. All this was without anyone guessing his identity. However, things didn't go quite as well when he tried to visit a state-run trade zone disguised in a white beard and traditional Arab robe, posing as a television reporter. The zone's management stopped him from his tour, saying he didn't have the proper permit, at which time, the king was forced to reveal his identity. King Abdullah's father, the late King Hussein, followed a similar practice during his 46-year reign.

When I read that, I thought, "That's nice. It shows real commitment to understanding the people's needs and would take a certain amount of courage." Could there be a better way to truly understand where people are, what their needs are, and how they feel? In an audience with the king they may feel intimidated and not be totally honest. Or, they may fear the consequences if what they say is too negative, like telling the king they think he's really a dishonest, arrogant rascal. On the other hand, they may try to impress him, influence him, and not really tell the truth, all for personal gain. But in disguise, unrecognized, King Abdullah can really get a true assessment of things, asking questions as one of them. Also, I can imagine there would be a certain amount of fun when he got caught and pulled off the disguise, as in the trade-zone. And, I expect he was never without some good back-up with disguised body guards hovering nearby in case he got in a tight spot or danger.

Most of us would like our politicians, even our president to spend a few days in our shoes, wouldn't we? We'd like them to learn about life as it is for us, to really know what we struggle with and what is important to us. But this needs to be more than a cameo photo-op that we often see politicians doing—going into a factory, putting on a hard hat, or distributing food at a homeless shelter. How about actually spending a few days doing our job, living with our difficulties and economic limitations for a few weeks? Then, imagine taking it a step further and having them experience our communities, really live with us and be one of us for an extended time? Yet, at the same time, we know even that is not the same as living in our skin. They can't feel the same anxieties we feel, the same frustrations, and the same limitations because, the

disguise will soon end, and they will go back to their power and privilege. While they are with us, dressing like us, going to work, living like us in all outward ways for a few days or weeks, it is after all, not real. It is just an act, a way of experiencing something. While it may help them understand some of the burden of your financial concern, they can't exactly "feel it" since they don't really live in your shoes.

But, the truth I want us to ponder this morning is, that once it really did happen that Someone came and actually lived in our skin— not a disguise, but lived just like we have to live. He lived with our bodily limitations, our loneliness, our frustrations, our physical pain, our joys, our feelings, and our temptations. He knew exhaustion, hunger, and betrayal. He really was one with us in every way except with our sin-nature, that broken part of us that seems to sabotage our best efforts to do the right thing so that we often end up doing what we really don't want to do. That Someone was not just the most important person in the world, but the King of all creation— in fact He is the creator of the entire universe. The One who created the majestic Cascades and brilliantly colored coral reefs; the One who made blueberries, peaches and oranges; the One who created trees, flowers, sunrises, sunsets, every living creature and all the millions of galaxies— that is who has come to us wrapped up in a tiny baby. I don't want us to miss that this is the *real* Christmas story.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

In an intriguing way, John invites us into pondering this mystery. He takes us back to the earliest reaches, even before Genesis 1:1 as he writes in John 1:1-3:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things were made;
without him nothing was made that has been made.*

John uses a familiar concept of the day to introduce us to who Jesus is— God himself in human flesh. To the Jewish people, "The Word" was another way of referring to God. In the minds of the Greek and Roman population of that day, "the word" was like reason, and considered to be the principle that governed the universe. So, John is using language familiar to almost everyone in that time to give them a concept of who this is who has come to us in Jesus the Christ. He is God— the One behind the governing of the universe. He is one with God, yet distinct. Thus, we have the careful wording:

*...and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

He was with God in the beginning.

We're not going to delve deeply into the mysteries of the Trinity this morning, and how God the Father and God the Son can be separate, yet one. God is beyond any attempt at reason to understand and fathom with our finite minds. Yet, each of the Gospels makes it absolutely clear that Jesus is God and at the same time totally human. And, incidentally, I believe this is an indirect argument for the authority of Scripture. If the Scriptures were of human origin, surely they would not make such an absurd claim. They would explain how it is. But, the claim is

clearly made with no attempt to explain it. The idea of the Trinity “feels self-contradictory.” The idea of Jesus being entirely human and entirely God at the same time “seems” impossible. But there is no equivocation that Jesus is God and at the same time fully human. Paul, in Phil. 2 mentions that though Christ Jesus was in His very nature God, He “emptied himself” of all that power, privilege, and glory to truly be with us and die for us. Jesus was so ordinary, that even his brothers and sisters (biologically half sisters and brothers) were scandalized at His claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God. They lived with Him and weren't aware of any “divine nature.” He'd worn diapers as they had. He had to study and learn things as they had. His memory wasn't perfect. He could forget and have to learn again. He made mistakes. Scripture tells us He had to “learn obedience.” He cried when he fell down as a child and bled when he was cut or scraped. None of them came to believe in Him as the Son of God until after the resurrection. Then, they all came to faith in Him. That should tell us how real and ordinary His humanity was.

This is a most essential point for us to grasp. It is the heart of the mission for Christ's coming. In our thinking of the life of Christ, we often miss the vulnerability of that life. Even in the birth narratives, we want to see a halo around the manger and a “silent night” where all is calm. Has any birth happened without screaming and pain and crying? Births are messy, painful, frightening and glorious. “Away in a Manger” pictures the little Lord Jesus not crying when awakened by the “lowing” cattle. Perhaps not, but you can be sure He cried when He was hungry, when He was tired, when He needed changing, and when startled as any normal baby does. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus all had to learn to trust the care and provision of their heavenly Father, just as we must. Throughout His earthly life, Jesus lived as we must also live. The miracles He performed, the Gospels make abundantly clear, were done not because He was God merely wearing a human disguise, but they were done in the power of the Holy Spirit— the same power given to believers and done in same way we must do them, through prayer and relinquishment to God. That is why Jesus did no miracles until after his baptism by John and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. Jesus affirms He does nothing on His own, but only the will of His Father.

Hebrews sums it up so well at the end of chapter 2 and again at the end of chapter 4. Listen to how *The Message* paraphrase puts it:

That's why he [Jesus] had to enter into every detail of human life. Then, when he came before God as high priest to get rid of the people's sins, he would have already experienced it all himself— all the pain, all the testing— and would be able to help where help was needed.

Now that we know what we have— Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God— let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all— all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

A priest is an intermediary, a bridge, a go between. Jesus came not only to take care of our sin problem and make us right with God, but also to help us in our struggle with life, our temptations, our weaknesses, our fears, and all the our other difficulties. In Jesus, God has

literally lived inside our skin.

One other aspect of the richness of John's use of "the Word" to speak of Jesus is that in Genesis, all creation takes place through words– "God said..." John affirms,

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Words also reveal. They let us know what a person thinks and something about their nature and personality. Jesus came as God's ultimate communication. As, Heb. 1:2 affirmed in our call to worship–

[God] has spoken to us by his Son...

In Jesus we see the nature and the love of God manifested perfectly in human flesh. Jesus reveals what God is really like.

But, there is one other truth I want to lift up about this that has become more meaningful to me over the years of being involved in ministry. The way God comes to us in Jesus, manifesting spiritual life in human form, is the way God wants us to embody the spiritual life to others.

RE-PRESENTING CHRIST

Jesus came that we might be born again. That means a miracle takes place within us when we receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. His Spirit takes up residence within us, infusing our dead spirits with life. Thus, we embody the Christ who has been born in us. The Scripture boldly proclaims, *You are the body of Christ* (1 Cor. 12:27). It doesn't say "you are like the body of Christ"– but "you are." As Christ lives in us, we incarnate Him– for "incarnate" means to clothe with flesh. So, God came to us incarnate in Christ. Now, as Christ enters into our lives through the Holy Spirit, His life takes physical shape in our living. We are the body Christ now has in the world. We may think of ourselves as representing Christ. But, breaking "representing" apart into "re-presenting" makes it more graphic.

People need to know what Jesus would be like as a store clerk, as a mechanic, as a teacher, as a homemaker, as a parent. The world needs to know how to forgive those who hurt us, how to build healthy relationships, and how to love difficult people. What do the fruits of the Spirit look like in real life– love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Gal. 5:23-24). Yes, that's our challenge as Christians. God's plan is that through our living, as we re-present Jesus in our actions, attitudes, and persons, people will be introduced to the reality of who Jesus really is and embrace God's love and the life offered to us in Him.

Dr. John Rosen is a psychiatrist in New York City known for his work with catatonic schizophrenics. These are some of the most severely mentally ill– often maintaining rigid or abnormal postures almost permanently. Many don't speak any words. Some are incontinent. But, Dr. Rosen has had remarkable success with some of these, largely due, he says, to his unconventional approach. He doesn't just visit his patients to treat them. He moves into the ward with them. He places his bed among their beds. If they don't talk, he doesn't talk either. He is a presence there with them, trying to show understanding and love. But, he goes even further. He puts his arms around them and hugs these unattractive, sometimes incontinent persons and loves them back to life. Often, the first words they speak are simply, "Thank you."

That is what God did for us by coming in Jesus. He moved into our ward with us. He placed His bed among ours. And in every way possible, He reached out to us with His arms of love, healing us and restoring us to life. I love that phrase in “O Holy Night!” that says, “Till He [Christ] appeared and the soul felt its worth.” In Christ’s coming, our souls find their worth. We in turn are commissioned to help other souls find their worth, introducing them to the source of it all, Jesus Christ. Can we be like Dr. Rosen, moving among the distressed, the dysfunctional, the messed-up people, the broken ones, and those bent on doing evil, loving them to life in the name of Christ?

CONCLUSION

Certainly there are many things in this life that are confusing and at times difficulties can seem overwhelming. But the real story of Christmas is one of God’s incredible love and commitment to us, and our assurance that He is on our side to help us. The descent He makes that first Christmas to be born among us is light-years beyond comprehension. Make time to ponder this love and wonder at His grace. He has not only opened the way of salvation for those who trust in Him to spend eternity in heaven, but also, He promises His abiding, strengthening presence to be with us each day. And that is a powerful antidote to all the troubles that beset us in this world.

Often times, His presence and love come to us through another Christian— re-presenting Christ to us. We likewise need to be quick to offer that same ministry to others we know of who need to experience Christ’s love. Without too much difficulty, most of us can think of people who need to be loved into life in Jesus’ name. Remember, *you are the body of Christ*...(1 Cor. 12:27).