

MOVED INTO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

4th Sunday of Advent

12-23-07
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Scripture: John 1:1-3; 10-18

TEXT: *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.*

– Jn. 1:14a, *Msg.*

INTRODUCTION

I came across some of the scientific musings of children that show creativity but are just a bit short of the mark.

- To explain nuclear reactions, one child said, “When they broke open molecules, they found they were only stuffed with atoms. But when they broke open atoms, they found them stuffed with explosions.”
- About astronomy, one child said, “Most books now say our sun is a star. But it still knows how to change back into a sun in the daytime.” And another said, “Some people can tell what time it is by looking at the sun. But I have never been able to make out the numbers.”
- Another student offered, “Vacuums are nothing. We only mention them to let them know we know they are there.”
- And, here are observations about the weather. “It is so hot in some places that people there have to live in other places.” (That student is a budding Yogi Berra). Another said, “The wind is like air, only pushier.” And here’s a final one that may send some of you to your dictionaries. “Isotherms and isobars are even more important than their names sound.”

Certainly we live in an amazing world with much that is beyond even our most brilliant scientist’s comprehension. This morning, we are going to the heart of the Christmas story, the truth of which is staggering and we will never fully understand in this life. It is that fact that in the birth of Jesus in the manger we have God himself stripping himself of power and taking on all the limitations of our humanity in order to rescue us, bringing salvation from the destruction our sin brings and that Satan is working toward.

We must be careful to not miss the essence of this central truth, just because it cannot be fully comprehended by finite minds. We must not reduce it to the level of our human understanding. We need to keep the facts clear and ponder the mystery. There is nothing confusing about what God is doing at Christmas. The real story of Christmas, as startling as it is, is very clear.

John’s Gospel was written after all the other three Gospels were already in circulation. Thus, the material he includes is almost all unique. He knows the facts of the virgin birth and the details of that first Christmas don’t need to be told again. But, he starts with the meaning of it all, reaching before the beginning of time. With great clarity, he sets before us what we dare not lose sight of in all the other wonderful details of Jesus’ birth. I’m going to highlight three of these truths:

1. Who Jesus really is.
2. Why He came:
first, to save us
and **second** to show us God and thus provide us with the help we need.

READ: John 1:1-3; 10-18

JESUS IS GOD (John 1:1-3)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He was with God in the beginning.

³ Through him all things were made;

without him nothing was made that has been made.

While this may sound a bit cryptic to us, it was utterly comprehensible to the audience John was writing to. John was writing to both Greeks and Jews. Jews were accustomed to using “the Word” as a way of referring to God— for He is the Word, for He spoke everything into existence. The Greeks used “the word” in the sense that it applied to the rational principle that governed the universe. So, by identifying “the Word” with God, John is saying that He, the God of the Bible, is the One that is behind the universe and holds it all together. As we read further in this prologue, “the Word” is unmistakably identified as Jesus.

In that first sentence, we see that Jesus has existed before the beginning of time— eternal. He was both *with* God and He *was* God. Here is a reference to the fact that God the Father and God the Son are separate and at the same time one in essence. Exactly how this is, is more than our finite minds can put together. At the same time, there is no mistaking that in Jesus, God is coming to us. This is further expounded in vs. 14 and 18:

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.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

“The One and Only, who is at the Father’s side,” is Jesus. The Message puts it as, *this one-of-a-kind-God-Expression*.

Furthermore, when Jesus, who is God, comes to us, He doesn’t just come in disguise, retaining all His Godly power— the power that created all things and holds all things together (Col. 1:17). He comes to us as a real flesh and blood human being, as vs. 14 affirms. In the virgin birth that both Matthew and Luke are careful to affirm, we know that conception was by the power of the Holy Spirit with Jesus developing as a fetus within Mary’s womb. We can be sure Jesus cried at birth, cried when He was hungry, cried when He needed changing, had to learn to talk and walk like every other baby. In fact Jesus was so normal, His brothers and sisters (biologically ½ brothers and sisters) were scandalized by His claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God. It was only after the resurrection they believed. Yet, Jesus was without sin. Through His Spirit-conception, He was born without original sin, that bend toward wrong that we are born with. This is a total immersion in our humanity— not a super human being, but just like us except

without sin.

That kind of humility, risk, and self-emptying is something forever beyond our comprehension. This is totally upside down from what this world's thinking is. In our thinking, the rich and powerful retain their power— and, if we're lucky, maybe they will use some of it to help us.

Queen Elizabeth II visited the United States a little over a decade ago. I'm sure many of you will remember that. Reporters delighted in spelling out the details of the logistics involved. Here are some of them:

- she had 4,000 pounds of luggage;
- there were two outfits for every occasion, plus a mourning outfit in case someone died;
- 40 pints of plasma;
- white kid-leather toilet seat covers;
- she brought her own hairdresser;
- two valets;
- and a host of other attendants.

A brief royal visit to a foreign country can easily cost 20 million dollars.

What a contrast in Jesus' coming— born in a stable, laid in a feed trough with I imagine more animal witnesses than human witnesses. Think of the vulnerability— a first time, inexperienced mother and adoptive father, in all probability teenagers, exposed to the elements, manure, and minimal sanitation. On this night they were homeless, without the support of family or even a midwife. Jesus grew up in a peasant home, worked hard to help support His family, and His education was that which was available to the commoners.

FOR OUR SALVATION (Jn. 1:10-13)

God's coming to us in Jesus is all about saving us. It is a rescue mission. John reminds us of that in the center verses of our text:

10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

His coming is so that we may understand and trust God's love and goodness so we can open our hearts to receive Him. All the power in the world cannot unlock the door to our hearts. They must be opened from the inside. But understanding God's love and commitment to us in Jesus can, through the Holy Spirit, open our hearts. Two chapters later, John gives this famous, succinct summary:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

You see, we need saving because through Adam and Eve the entire human race fell into bondage to sin and the powers of evil. This world became enemy occupied territory. But God didn't give

up on us. In spite of this world's rejection of Him, His love continued to be poured out, and He continued giving guidance in the right way to live. Yet, in spite of our best human intentions, we continue to do the wrong things, because our hearts have been corrupted. That is why Jesus had to come. Through Him, and only through Him can our hearts be transformed to be truly right. But His coming at Christmas constitutes an invasion of enemy occupied territory. It is the beach-head from which salvation of the world will come.

In Tom Brokaw's book, The Greatest Generation, he tells the story of Mary Wilson who was the head of 51 army nurses. During World War II, the Allies got bogged down in the boot of Italy. They attempted a daring breakout by launching an amphibious landing on the Anzio Beach. By the way, Polly's father was there. Unfortunately, the Allies got pinned down at the landing site and came dangerously close to being driven back into the ocean.

Mary Wilson with her 51 nurses went ashore at Anzio. Things got so bad that bullets were zipping through the tent as she assisted the surgeon in surgery. As things continued to deteriorate, arrangements were made to get the nurses out. But Mary Wilson would have none of it. She refused to leave at the gravest hour. As she related her story years later, she said, "How could I possibly leave them. I was a part of them."

That's what God is doing for us in Jesus. He has become part of us. I can't imagine anyone not wanting to be like Jesus and live like Him if they really understand what He is like and the greatness of His love and grace extended to us. Opening our hearts to Him brings about a miracle. We are born of God, John tells us. In other words, our identity changes— we belong to God and His life begins to work its transformation in us.

The next part of our text gives us more insight as to why Jesus came. Here we can only stand in awe of the extent of His love. As my brother puts Jn. 1:14, *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood*. Yes, living right where we are to show us God and thus to provide the help we need in living.

TO REVEAL GOD (Jn. 1:14-18)

Taking on our humanity with all its weaknesses and limitations is mind-boggling enough. Why did God stoop even lower— not even choosing a wealthy family with its security and privilege? In Jesus, God is deliberately reaching out and identifying with the lowest rung of society, becoming one with those whose life is most difficult— all so we can come to know God and trust God.

It is all because He loves us so much. As our text says, He made his dwelling among us and *we have seen His glory... full of grace and truth* (14). In Jesus, we see what God is like. As Heb. 1:3 says, *Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being*. What is God's glory that Jesus shows us? Obviously this glory is not the same as what this world looks to as glory. The glory of the rich and famous of our world is in their fantastic houses, cars, yachts, jewels, and power to control their world. This is not Jesus, and not God. We find a clue to the meaning of glory in our text in the incident of Moses on Mt. Sinai when he is there getting the law and conversing with God. Moses makes a bold request of God, asking Him to show His

glory. God's response is,

"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. (Ex 33:19)

In other words, God's glory is His goodness, His mercy, His compassion. That's what Jesus came to show us. And certainly no one questions that those qualities were seen perfectly in Jesus. His goodness, mercy, and compassion is so great that He died for us, for unrepentant sinners, the death we deserve on the cross.

Jesus was "*full of grace and truth*" are the other two big words in Jn. 1:14. Then, Jn. 1:17, *grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*. Grace is undeserved and unearned forgiveness. And, Jesus not only gave us the truth, but He is the embodiment of truth. His life is true and everything about Him is true. There is nothing that is really true that doesn't match-up to Jesus.

His moving into our neighborhood wasn't just a little visit. It was total immersion in what we all go through and experience. As Hebrews expresses it so well: Heb 2:17-18 and 4:15

...He [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.

CONCLUSION

Augustine expressed the paradox of God's humility in His coming to us in Jesus like this:

"Man's maker was made man that He,
 Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast;
 that the Bread might hunger,
 the Fountain thirst,
 the Light sleep,
 the Way be tired on its journey;
 that Truth might be accused of false witnesses,
 the Teacher be beaten with whips,
 the Foundation be suspended on wood;
 that Strength might grow weak,
 that the Healer might be wounded;
 that Life might die.

The Nicene Creed is most careful in affirming exactly what is happening at Christmas. As you turn in your hymnals to that, note the second paragraph is longer than all the rest of the creed. That is the section that carefully defines the incarnation for us. Let's join in reciting it.