

Jesus, Still the Reason for the Season

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John 1:10-18

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Does anyone feel that they have just been through a tornado of activity? The hustle and bustle of the holiday season seems to have flown by with the decorating of the house emphasized with the trimming of the tree, baking of cookies and goodies, buying presents and wrapping each and every one of them to surprise the recipient, cooking the meals and making sure every detail is just right. The effort that is placed into our rituals for Christmas is pretty amazing. The holiday often offers extra time to spend with family as schools and work places take a break from the daily routines and provides additional opportunities to gather—even if we had to do it virtually with some this year.

But, what about the babe in the manger, Jesus? In the hustle and bustle of holiday chaos, we sometimes lose sight of the reason for the season. Within the church calendar, did you know that today is the second Sunday of Christmas? That's right, it is still Christmas. Even though the tree may be gone (it gets to be a fire hazard at this point), the presents may be all unwrapped, some are even returned, and some people have already

broken their New Year's resolution to lose the weight they gained by eating the Christmas cookies, we should still be celebrating the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. In fact, you know the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas"? It actually refers to the 12 days that fall after Christmas--between December 25 and January 5. This celebration is called the Twelvetide and it represents an important time in the church calendar. It is intended to give us time to reflect on the meaning of the Incarnation-- that is, the entry of God into the world that He made, in the form of a baby, and what it means in our lives.

Today, our reading from the book of John recounts the birth of Jesus, not the one that tells the story of a census requiring a young couple to travel, only to find that they needed to stay in stable to birth their son. Unlike the accounts from Matthew and Luke which tell the story of the birth, John (along with Mark) tell the deeper meaning behind the birth. Although many of our Christmas traditions have taken our focus away from Jesus, the Apostle John is careful to speak of the birth in terms of where Jesus originated and what this birth means to us. As we explore John's writing, let's consider four points about what Christmas is by examining: 1. Jesus as a child, 2. How The Word became flesh and what that means 3. How Christmas gifts us with grace upon grace and 4. Finally the intimacy created by Christmas.

When we look into the Christmas story, we are confronted with the same fact that Mary and Joseph were: Jesus was a child, a baby to be exact. Now, that may not seem to be that big of a deal, but remember, the Jewish people were looking for a king to be their Messiah. This was a baby! He was completely dependent upon his mother for food and his father protection. Mary and Joseph were parents caring for the child of God, Jesus. Mary and Joseph relied on God and his direction when caring for the baby. They listened to God regarding the child's upbringing, including when and where to go or when to stay.

This concept of a "child of God" is of ultimate importance. If we were to read through the Gospel of John, we would find that one of the central themes that John emphasizes is that of being "a child of God." In verse 12, we see this come into play, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 11:52 points to the children of God, when it states, "And not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." The point that John is trying to make is that we need to get into the manger with the baby Jesus to truly understand where our care comes from. The baby Jesus was not self-reliant, and neither are we. If we are to become children of God, we must give up the belief that we can rely on our own

ambitions and give God control of our lives. This happens through prayer and petition as we turn our lives over to our Creator and Father and allow Him to lead and guide our lives. When I think of giving up control, I cannot help but think of Carrie Underwood's song "Jesus Take the Wheel." The song is about a young mother, driving home in a snow storm on Christmas Eve. She has had a tough year and feels her life is out of control-- Have any of you felt like you've had a year like that?--The mother hits a patch of black ice and loses control of her vehicle. At this point, the mother cries out to God to take the wheel-- she gives into God's desire for her to be his child as she pleads:

Jesus take the wheel
Take it from my hand
'Cause I can't do this on my own
I'm letting go
So give me one more chance
And save me from this road I'm on
Jesus, take the wheel

Jesus was a baby, a child. We need to recognize that we are children too...children of God who are completely and utterly dependent upon Him now and throughout all eternity.

After John speaks of Jesus, as the child of God and our ability to be children of God, he turns to the concept of the Word becoming Flesh. The

idea that God became human, that He joined us on earth, is of great importance.

There is a Greek word within verse 14 that should be pointed out. The verse reads, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” We are told that God “lived among us.” The Greek word in the original document was “es-keen-oh-sen” and it means “to tent” or “to tabernacle” with. For the Jewish people, this statement had great meaning.

If we recall Moses and the trip from Egypt to the Promised Land, God traveled with the Israelites and rested in the tabernacle which was a very heavy tent. This traveling location for the Lord was ultimately important to the Israelites as it showed that God was not stuck in one place, but rather He would travel with them wherever they would go. The idea that God was mobile was lost to the Jewish nations when Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem. From that point, the people believed that God resided in the Temple and when the Temple was destroyed, God could no longer be with them. The prophet Ezekiel was the one chosen to reveal that God still had His mobility. Ezekiel 11:22 states, “Then the cherubim lifted up their wings,

with the wheels beside them; and the glory of the Lord was above them.”

The Lord had wheels and he was traveling with them!

The importance of this passage cannot be understated: With the birth of Jesus, not only is God dwelling with us, but by becoming flesh, he is one of us. This changes everything. Rather than God being a separate entity, he is walking with, talking with and living with us as one of us. Within the Christmas story, we see the importance of this change in that God not only goes where God’s people go, but now He is who they are. God now lives with us by taking on our form, our humanity. God is one of us through the miracle of this birth, this Christmas.

The importance of this transition brings us to our next point: Christmas is grace. In fact, as John states in verse 16, “From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” The blessing of this statement gives us reason to look at the remainder of the Gospel of John as he reveals, through the actions of Jesus, the evidence of true grace for the children of God. Jesus reveals grace through so many stories of miracles and healings. Remember the wine at the wedding of Cana, the healing of man at the pool on the Sabbath, the feeding of five thousand, the forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery, the blind man receiving sight, and the resurrection of Lazarus.

The culmination of the evidence of God's grace is fulfilled in His willingness to die on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. This is grace upon grace!

I recommend that you read the Gospel of John between now and Easter. You will learn what grace is through the actions of Jesus. You might try an exercise that I learned in seminary this past semester. It is called an Ignatian Prayer utilizing "The Redeemed Imagination." It sounds big, but is actually pretty simple. You start by reading a story, like the story of the Death of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Then read it a second time, but in this reading, pick a character and try to imagine their complete set of feelings: what they would smell, taste, touch, see...anything that puts you in the moment with them. Try to feel what they are feeling. For example, imagine Mary's full set of emotions when Jesus approached and how she called him out for not coming sooner, or Martha doubting Jesus by warning him of the smell that would be present in the tomb. Then imagine the awe or guilt when you realize that Jesus had the power to do all things through the will of God, the Father, when Lazarus walks out of the grave.

To give an example of grace, I would like to share from Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace*:

"One who has been touched by grace will no longer look on those who stray as "those evil people" or "those poor people who need our

help." Nor must we search for signs of "love-worthiness." Grace teaches us that God loves because of who God is, not because of who we are.

Grace does not depend on what we have done for God but rather what God has done for us. Ask people what they must do to get to heaven and most reply, "Be good." Jesus' stories contradict that answer. All we must do is cry, "Help!"

Repentance, not proper behavior or even holiness, is the doorway to grace. And the opposite of sin is grace, not virtue".

Yancy further shared this story:

A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, Saint Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates.

Saint Peter says, 'Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I'll give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in.'

'Ok', the man says. 'I was married to the same woman for fifty years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.'

'That's wonderful,' says Saint Peter. 'That's worth three points!'

'Three points? he says. 'Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.'

'Terrific!' says Saint Peter. 'That's certainly worth a point.'

'One point? Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.'

'Fantastic that's good for two more points.'

‘Two points?’ the man cries. ‘At this rate the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the grace of God!’

‘Come on in!’

It is through this type of story and belief that we begin to understand “grace upon grace.” When we truly begin to grasp the Grace provided by Jesus, it is then that we begin to understand the gift of that baby in the manger and that Christmas is all about grace.

This brings us to a final point about Christmas and Jesus’ birth which is reflected in verse 18: Christmas is intimacy. Verse 18 states, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” The gift of Christmas is the gift of being intimate with God. The Greek version of chapter 18 has a little variance in the translation given in the NIV. When we read “in the closest relationship with the Father” we may think of a Father-Son type of relationship, however, the Greek version actually places the Son, that is Jesus, “in the kolpon of the Father.” The actual translation for kolpon is the bosom, so John is trying to make the point that this relationship between Jesus and the Father has the intimacy of an embrace that brings Jesus into the bosom of the Lord.

If you are a parent, you may understand what it feels like to embrace your child fully, pulling them into your bosom and holding them so tight that it feels as if they are part of you. During a couple of days leading up to Christmas and into this Christmas season, I was able to be with my daughters and son-in-law. The hugs between me and my children were intense, having not seen them for several months. That drought of intimacy due to the current pandemic was causing a sadness that was restored in that embrace. Some of you are still waiting for those long-awaited moments of intimacy with your separated loved ones. I pray that those moments will come quickly.

Here is another interesting point regarding the word “kolpon.” In the Gospel of John, the word is only used one other time. John 13:23 speaks of “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and that the disciple “was reclining next to him” during the Last Supper. This passage brings two points to mind. First, the original Greek transcript states that “There was one of the Jesus’ disciples in the bosom of Jesus, whom he loved.” The only other time that the word kolpon is used is to describe the closeness of a disciple to Jesus. This brings us to the second point regarding this verse: The disciple is not named. Many Biblical scholars would like to place a name on this disciple, possibly even making it the humble author named John. However, consider

that the disciple is not named to make the statement more inclusive. By having the disciple remain unnamed, we can now consider that disciple, “the one that Jesus loved,” could be any of the disciples. Not only any disciple sitting in the room at the Last Supper, but any disciple who is a “child of God.” God desires to have an intimate relationship with each and every one of us when we make the commitment to be one of his children.

I have been reading a book by Craig Groeschel titled *The Christian Atheist*. I understand that some of you have studied this text in a previous Bible study. Groeschel discusses many points regarding Christians who believe that there is a God, but fail to acknowledge Him, let alone to follow Him. I’d like to share a conversation from Groschen’s third chapter that I think will bring clarity to what I have been talking about. Groeschel writes:

Several years ago, I was having lunch with a man I had just met. For some reason, he opened up to me about his struggling marriage.

When I asked him how God fit into his marriage, his countenance darkened, and he cut me off: “I don’t believe in God, and I don’t want to talk about religion.”

Not wanting to push too hard, I respected his stance and continued to talk about his marriage without mentioning anything more about God.

He interrupted me again, repeating that he didn't believe in God and that he didn't want me to push religion on him.

I stopped in puzzlement, then resumed the conversation, all the more resolved not to mention God. A third time he blurted out, "I don't want to talk about God. I don't believe in God."

Finally, it dawned on me: This hurting man really did want to talk about God. Since he wouldn't drop the subject, I asked carefully, "Tell me about this God that you don't believe in." He was happy to oblige. He said he didn't believe in a God who was angry, always waiting to catch people doing wrong, and who delighted in sending people to hell.

This time I interrupted: "That's really interesting. I don't believe in that God either."

He looked confused. "But I thought you were a pastor."

Seeing a slightly opened door, I explained, "I believe in a good God who takes personal interest in all of us. My God loved the world so much that he was willing to send his Son, Jesus, to die for us. I believe in a God who loves you more that you could ever imagine."

The man looked at me sadly, obviously carrying a heavy load of spiritual pain. After a moment, he said, "I wish I could believe in that God, like you."

Today, we need to continue to celebrate Jesus, as the reason for this season. You still have two more days until we begin the season of the Epiphany...then again, you can always celebrate that fact that Jesus was born a child, just as you are a child of God. Continue to celebrate that He came to earth as the Word became flesh to feel what we feel and to help us understand that he is fully with us. Through this Christmas gift, Jesus taught us and showed us what grace really is as he piled grace upon grace upon us. And finally, throughout this Christmas season, celebrate the intimacy that God wants to have with you through the baby lying in a manger.

And all God's people said...Amen.