

“Let’s Keep it Simple!”
John 1:1-18

Not long ago, I heard about a most unusual Christmas card. We’re used to Christmas cards adorned with proclaiming angels, peaceful manger scenes, and even, jolly Santas. But this card was a little different, to say the least.

The front of the card contained this statement: “History is crowded with men who would be gods.” Underneath this statement were pictures of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Adolph Hitler, Vladimir Lenin, Napoleon Bonaparte and Mao tse Tung, among others.

Inside the card was a picture of Jesus with Mary and Joseph and these words, “But only one God who would be man.” (1)

Christians have a word for the message of this card; Incarnation. Our final scripture lesson for this morning lifts up the reality of the Incarnation, the mystery of God who became a man in Jesus Christ. Let’s listen now to John 1:1-18.

Some years ago, reflecting on the wonderful mystery of the Incarnation, Pope John Paul II said, “Christmas demands faith, because Christmas is a mystery. Our reason cannot succeed in trying to understand how God could possibly have loved us to such a degree...such a thing baffles the intellect.”

God in human flesh. The Incarnation. It is mysterious. It is baffling. It may surprise you that the early church fathers puzzled far more over the Incarnation than the Virgin Birth of Jesus. The early church fathers weren’t very concerned about how God could become a human being; they were much more concerned about why – why God would become human.

As Christians, we still puzzle over this question of why God would become human. Reflecting on this question, Pastor James R. Van Tholen in his book of sermons, “Where All Hope Lies,” says,

From the human perspective, when you compare God to the other gods of other religions in the world, you have to say our God is really sort of odd. He uses the most common of people, people that aren’t any different from any of us here; he comes in the most common of ways, when by his Spirit an anonymous young woman is found to be with child. And the strangest thing is that he comes at all – he’s not the Above-Us-God, too holy to come down. This God’s love is so immense that he wants to come down. And he has proven his love by the fact that he did come down and touch our ground. (2)

Here’s at least one answer to why God became human. God’s love is so immense that he wants to come down.

The Apostle Paul, in Philippians 2, tells us that God’s love is so immense that Jesus “...gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.” (Philippians 2:7, NLT)

Sometimes, I think we forget all that Christ gave up or laid aside in order to come down to us.

Pastor and author Leith Anderson tells this story that illustrates the enormity of our Lord’s sacrifices on our behalf.

He writes,

Several years ago, I was visiting Manila and was taken, of all places, to the Manila garbage dump and saw something beyond belief. Tens of thousands of people make their homes on that dump site. They’ve constructed shacks out of things other people have thrown away. And they send their children out early every morning to scavenge for food out of other people’s garbage, so they can have family meals. People have been born and grow up there on the garbage dump. They have their families, their children, their shacks, their garbage to eat, finish out their lives, and die there without ever going anywhere else, even the city of Manila. It’s an astonishing thing.

But Americans also live on the garbage dump. They are missionaries, Christians who have chosen to leave their own country and communicate the love of Jesus Christ to people who otherwise would never hear it. That is amazing to me. People would leave what we have to go and live on a garbage dump. Amazing, but not as amazing as the journey from heaven to earth.

The Son of God made that journey, and he knew what he was doing. He knew where he was going. He knew what the sacrifices would be. He journeyed from heaven to earth on a mission to save the human race. (3)

It is amazing! “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word for “dwelt” in the original language of this text literally means, “pitched a tent.” The Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us. He came to be with us.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* renders this verse, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

Friends, God has come among us in Christ. He has pitched a tent, and moved into the neighborhood.

Why? Because his love was so immense, and his desire to rescue us from our sin was so overwhelming, that he wanted to come.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, once said, “The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that he sunk himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding.” (4)

The Incarnation is beyond all human understanding. A love so immense – who could understand it? But, maybe we don’t have to understand it as much as we need to receive it.

The great 20th century clergyman, Norman Vincent Peale, tells the story of an encounter he had with a fellow preacher in New York City, Sam Shoemaker. Peale writes, “I was with Sam one day and he suddenly asked, ‘What do you think God told

Jesus the night he sent him down to earth?’ I must have looked astonished, for he said, ‘He was just a child leaving home. Wouldn’t the heavenly Father give him instructions?’

‘Well’, I replied, ‘I guess he would.’ Sam continued by suggesting that just as Jesus left the door of heaven he asked, ‘Father, what shall I tell the people down on earth?’

God replied, ‘Son, don’t complicate it with big words. Make it simple. Just tell the people of earth that I love them.’” (5)

Friends, this Christmas let’s keep it simple! Let’s just concentrate on the message Jesus came to bring us – a message of his immense love for us. For God’s love is right here in our midst today. In Jesus Christ, God has pitched his tent and come into our neighborhood. Emmanuel - God is with us. I’m not sure that we’ll ever understand a love like that, but we can receive it, if we will. May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

Notes:

- (1) From comments made by the Reverend David Montzingo, St. Dunstan’s Episcopal Church, December 18, 2005.
- (2) Van Tholen, James R. *Where All Hope Lies: Sermons for the Liturgical Year*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.
- (3) From “Jesus from Heaven to Earth,” PreachingToday.com, # 208.
- (4) Martin Luther in *Table Talk*, Christianity Today, Vol. 36, no. 15.
- (5) From “A Gift of God’s Love,” a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Robert Matlack, Hamburg, New York.

-Robin Garvin
Dec. 24, 2006