

“THE WORD BECAME FLESH”

December 24, 2023

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If you have a Bible, I'd invite you turn with me to John 1.

If you're just joining us tonight, over the last several weeks in our sermons we've been looking at the whole storyline of the Bible by looking at the theme of the presence of God with his people. This thread runs through all of Scripture and serves in many ways as a driving force in the story. That is, the story of the Bible is the story of God's desire to dwell with his people.

I said in our first sermon in this series that part of the reason that we're looking Bible through this lens is to put Christmas into context—to explain why it matters that Jesus is called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us”—why it's significant that we sing “Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.”

Back in Genesis we saw that human beings were created to dwell in perfect unbroken fellowship with the God. We were made for eternal life in God's presence, who is Life itself. But through our sin and rebellion against God we have been cast out from the presence of God and cut off from him as the source of life. Instead of perfect fellowship with God, we and all people come into the world alienated from him, under his righteous condemnation, and dead in our trespasses and sins.

But God is rich in mercy, and he did not abandon us nor his earnest desire to dwell in perfect fellowship with us. And the story of the Old Testament, from Genesis 3 onward, might be understood as the story of how God was working to redeem a people for his own possession, that he might dwell among them again.

But in order to do so, something would need to be done to deal with this chasm of sin that separates us from God—and this is something we cannot do on our own. We cannot work or will our way back into fellowship with God. If people are ever again to dwell in God's presence, it will not be because we have managed to get back to him, but rather because he has come to us.

The Old Testament ends with God promising to do just that.

And tonight, we celebrate that what God has done exactly as he promised, bringing together all of these strands from across the entire Old Testament together to find fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who is “God with us.”

And it is here, that we find the very center, the beating heart, of Bible's story. *In Jesus, God has come to dwell with us in order that we might come to dwell with him.*

We'll unpack that statement in two parts this evening. First, the claim that "In Jesus, God has come to dwell with us." And second, that he has done so "in order that we might come to dwell with him."

I. IN JESUS, GOD HAS COME TO DWELL WITH US.

First, *in Jesus, God has come to dwell with us*. We see in John chapter 1, in what the Apostle has written about the One he calls "the Word,"—which we find later in the chapter is another title for Jesus Christ. Starting in verse 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning, with God. This one that the John calls "the Word" is both *with God* and *is God*.

And if there were any question about whether this one called the Word was actually God himself, it's answered in verse 3, where John says: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." That is, the Word is *the Creator*. It's not that he is a creator, one among many, nor is he a creature that God merely employed to help him create everything else. John says "*all things* were made through him" and "without him nothing was made that is made." That is—the Word is the Uncreated Creator. He is God himself.

Now, left by themselves, these statements in the first verses of John's Gospel would not be particularly controversial. But what makes these claims so extraordinary is what we read then in verse 14. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." It's what we call in theology "the incarnation"—we might say "the in-fleshing of God." God the Creator took on the nature of his creature. The Son of God, without any loss or change to his divinity, took on humanity. The Word, who was with God, who is God, who created all things, was born in Bethlehem and they called his name Jesus.

And then, John says, "he dwelt among us." It's hard to overstate the theological importance of that word "dwelt." This is more than John just saying that Jesus lived among us. There's other, more common ways to say that in Greek. The word that John uses here is very specific—it's the verb form of the word "tabernacle." So, "the word became flesh and *became the tabernacle* in our midst."

The tabernacle was the place where God in his glory dwelt among the people of Israel. For John to say that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us is for him to say that Jesus is the true tabernacle, the fulfillment of everything the tabernacle, and later the Temple, was to be.

We read this in the book of Colossians as well, where the apostle Paul says that "in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" and again "in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." And in John 2, Jesus makes this claim quite explicit when, in a rather tense conversation about the Temple with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, he says that he himself *is the Temple*, and that if they destroy this Temple, in three days he would raise it up.

Jesus is the place where God manifests his glorious presence. When both the tabernacle and the Temple were completed, the glory of God descended to dwell within. But the glory of God was not in

the temple any longer. Now John says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen *his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.*” The glory of God that had been seen in the Tabernacle, and in the Temple, the glory of God that had departed the Temple during the days of Ezekiel because of the sin and idolatry and faithlessness of Israel, the glory of God that had been promised would again come to dwell among his people forever—the glory and fullness of God’s presence, John says, we saw in Jesus.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose and plan to dwell among us and fulfill his promises to us.

But this fulfillment of God’s promises happens in a most unexpected way. The God who wraps himself with light like a garment, now wraps himself in human flesh, and comes not to a temple nor to a palace, but to a manger. He comes not in power and great glory, but in fragile humility. He who is immortal takes on himself mortality. But why? Why not come in power and great glory before the eyes of all, as he had when he came to dwell in the tabernacle and then again in the Temple? Why did he veil himself in flesh? Why appear in such obscurity?

II. GOD HAS COME TO DWELL WITH US IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT COME TO DWELL WITH HIM

The answer to that question has everything to do with the purpose for which he came. And so we move to the second point—that In Jesus, God has come to dwell with us in order that we might come to dwell with him.

And in order for that to happen, we need more than a teacher to instruct us in how to be better people. We need more than a virtuous example to follow. If that’s all that Jesus did—and some think—it would still leave the most fundamental problem human beings face unsolved. If God has come to dwell with us in order that we might come to dwell with him, it means that he will need to deal with that barrier that separates us from God and prevents us from dwelling with him in the unhindered fellowship with him that we were created for—that is, he will need to deal with our sin.

And so the child born in Bethlehem on that first Christmas was not just called Immanuel, “God with us,” but, the angel told Joseph, “you will call his name Jesus” [a name that means “the Lord saves”], “because he will save his people from their sins.”

And this saving us from our sins would require more than just Jesus’ birth and life and teaching and example. The Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us is wondrous, miraculous, and absolutely necessary, but is, *by itself*, insufficient. If Jesus had just come to live among us, to be the dwelling place of God with us, it would still have left us dead in our sins and under condemnation.

Christ humbled himself, emptied himself by taking on our human nature, and dwelling among us, but not just so that he could be our example, or our teacher, or even our King—though he is most certainly all of those things. He did not come “to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for

many." The Good Shepherd came, as he says in John 10, "that we might have life, and have it abundantly." He desires, as he says in John 17, that we "might be with him where he is, and that we might see his glory"—not veiled behind a curtain, but in the fullness of his presence for which we were created; not just temporarily, as the disciples saw on the mount of transfiguration, but eternally. And in order to do this, the Good Shepherd came lay down his life for the sheep.

The Word became flesh that he might become a sacrifice.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the tabernacle and the temple not only in that he is the dwelling place of God's glory, but also in that *he is the place where true atonement will be made for sin*. It is for *this reason* that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us—that he might become, as we read further down in John 1:29: "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

God himself took on flesh and blood and was born as a baby in Bethlehem, in order that his flesh might be broken and his blood poured out as a substitute, taking on himself the divine death penalty rightly due to our sin, for only in so doing could human beings have eternal life in the presence of God.

In Jesus, God came to dwell with us in order that he might die for us. Christmas is the prologue to the crucifixion. The cross is not the tragic end of the Christmas story, it's the very point of the Christmas story.

What all the sacrifices at the tabernacle and the Temple symbolized and foreshadowed, but could never actually accomplish themselves, the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus fulfilled and accomplished entirely, so that as he died, he could cry out, not "I'll be back later to pay the rest" or "I did my part, now its up to you" but he cry out, "It is finished."

The Apostle Paul says it this way: "God *has done* [completed, finished] what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do [that is, deal with our sin]. How so? By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, God condemned sin in the flesh"—that is, in the flesh of Jesus—and because he did so, "there is now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus." In the death of Jesus, the Word made flesh, God executed the sentence of condemnation due to our sin so that now those who entrust themselves to him will never be condemned.

But Jesus' death does more than just release those who trust him from the condemnation of sin. He also restores us to fellowship with God. He saves us not just *from our sin* but *for his presence*.

When Jesus died, the Gospel writers tell us, the veil of the temple—that thick curtain that blocked the way to the Most Holy Place, signifying the barrier of sin that kept humanity exiled from the presence of God—when Jesus died that veil was torn in two from top to bottom. And that's no coincidence.

Heaven had ripped it apart. Using the imagery of Eden, Jesus had gone under the flaming sword of God's judgment on our behalf in order to open to us again the way to the Tree of Life, the very

presence of God, that we might live forever. The tearing of the curtain in the temple powerfully symbolized that through Jesus and his sacrificial, atoning death in our place, humanity could again have access to the presence of God and the eternal life and blessing and joy that comes with it.

The barrier of sin that had separated God and man had been dealt with once and for all by the sacrifice of Jesus.

And in confirmation of the completeness and effectiveness of this sacrifice, just as Jesus had said in John 2, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," three days later he rose from the grave—defeating death and opening to all who would come access the presence of God and life everlasting.

In Jesus, God has come to dwell with us in order that we might come to dwell eternally with him.

And the question, friends, that you must consider this Christmas is this: if in Jesus, God has come to dwell with us, *will you come to God through him?*

In Israel, the tabernacle was the sole place of God's mediation with his people. It was the only place, where the people could meet God and worship him rightly. And what the tabernacle foreshadowed has found fulfillment in Jesus—the True Temple, the True Priest, the True Mediator, and the True Sacrifice. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 2: "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."

And so now there is but one way to access the presence of God, one way to receive eternal life, one way to know God—and that is through Jesus. He said himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, *no one comes to the Father except through me.*"

And so Jesus invites all to come to God through him. He says, "Come to me, that you may have life." He says, "come all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." He says, "whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

And the book of Hebrews echoes these invitations, saying "since we have confidence to enter the holy places [that is, the presence of God] by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near* [draw near to the very presence of God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The only way "through the curtain," that is, into the eternal, life-giving presence of God, is through Jesus, the Word made flesh. Through Jesus you may receive forgiveness of sins, cleansing, eternal life—from his fullness you may receive grace upon grace—for nothing of this salvation is the result of your sincere efforts or inherent goodness. It is entirely the gift of God freely offered to you.

But friends you must know that though it is freely offered, it is not automatic. Neither Jesus' birth nor his death nor his resurrection benefits those who reject his gracious invitation to come to him. As we read earlier in John 1, there are many to whom Jesus came that did not receive him. But because Jesus is the only way back to the life-giving presence of God, rejecting him and his free offer of life would mean to remain eternally cast out of God's presence and under his righteous judgment.

Dwelling in the presence of God in eternal joy or dwelling away from the presence of the Lord in eternal punishment is *entirely a matter of how you respond to Jesus*.

Jesus offers you life in his name and he refuses none who come to him. Though many reject him, as we read earlier, *"to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."*

Those who hear his voice and follow him, who take the Good Shepherd to be the Shepherd of their souls, *"shall never perish,"* but *"shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden for their sin, waiting on the promise of one who would come to restore them to fellowship with God. Israel too was cast out of God's presence for their sin and idolatry, and longed for a Savior who would reconcile them to God. And now Jesus has come, given himself for us, risen again from death, and he says *"I am able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through me"* and *"whoever comes to me, I will never cast out."*

In Jesus, God has come to dwell with us, in order that we might come to dwell with him. So I invite you come, this Christmas, and by faith take hold of the gracious gift of God's Son, given for you, and receive life in his name, that you might dwell forever with him, in whose presence there is fullness of joy.