

Christmas Eve 2023

We will go to John 1 today to drink deep of the truth of the incarnation: the enfleshment of God that happened on that first Christmas, whenever it was.

The date of Christmas itself isn't that significant - December 25th is probably wrong - but the event that we commemorate tomorrow is what Theologian Herman Bavinck called "the central fact in the entire history of the world."

That God became "veiled in flesh", "incarnate deity" as we sing in Joy to the World, is the central reality because it is the answer for the deepest question and deepest longing of our hearts.

The deepest question we all ask is, "What is God like?" And the deepest longing is for satisfaction - for perfect joy, peace, and love.

We sing about Bethlehem, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." All of our fears about what God might be like, and all of our hopes for something better and satisfying, they are answered in Jesus's birth.

So if you're here today wondering what God might be like, if you're wondering if your deep dissatisfaction and longing can ever be satisfied, and if you wonder if there's any hope that there can ever be anything but unsatisfied angst and a sense that there must be more than that, I'd invite your attention to the manger.

When John, who spent about 3 years with Jesus, described the incarnation, he said this:

John 1:1-14 "1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has

not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

We could unpack this text for weeks, so if you leave today thinking, “we never said anything about this part,” you’ll be absolutely right. We can do only what we can do in half an hour. So if we’ve already admitted defeat: this sermon will not do this text justice, look at what it says about Jesus and who He is and what He came to do.

This text says that Jesus is God.

John 1: 1-3 “1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”

This “Word,” Jesus, didn’t originate in Bethlehem. He took on flesh there, He was born there, but He existed long before the manger.

John starts his book with a phrase that would be familiar to anyone who has even started to read the Bible. “In the beginning.” Genesis starts with these words and goes on to describe the creation of everything. (If you’re a regular Bible reader like I hope you are, you might read this on January first every year.)

But John goes even further back than creation and says “In the beginning was the Word.” Way back, before anything was made, this Word was there.

This Word was with God. And this word was God.

So Jesus is God.

Not just a great human teacher, not just a great religious founder, but there in the manger

was God Himself. Which means that if we want to know what God is like, we can look at Jesus - in all of his life - in his living, in his suffering, in his dying, and in the manger we see God - EXACTLY God.

Jesus said in

John 14:9, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.”

Hebrews 1:1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

When we look at Jesus, we are not just looking at a really good guy. We aren't just looking at someone who really knew God. We are looking at God.

Christians have always affirmed that Jesus is God - truly God.

The Nicene Creed says He is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.”

And this is a truth for us not to just have in our heads, but to love.

Because this means that the only real God that there is - is EXACTLY like Jesus. Because Jesus is God.

T.F Torrence writes, “There is in fact no God behind the back of Jesus, no act of God other than the act of Jesus, no God but the God we see and meet in him. Jesus Christ is the open heart of God, the very love and life of God poured out to redeem humankind, the mighty hand and power of God stretched out to heal and save sinners. All things are in God's hands, but the hands of God and the hands of Jesus, in life and in death, are the same.”

This is a big deal. Because sometimes we think that Jesus is the mask that God wears. That there's the real God who is king of mean and temperamental, not real big on compassion, not very eager to show grace, so he hired Jesus as his P.R. firm to go to earth to try to broker some relationship with mankind.

In this view, Jesus comes in and says, “God didn’t really mean that, God isn’t like that, God is a lot better than He actually is.”

But Jesus is not God’s P.R. guy trying to change public perception about God, He isn’t trying to downplay attributes of God, He is GOD.

Michael Reeves writes, “Let us then be rid of that horrid, sly idea that behind Jesus, the friend of sinners, there is some more sinister being, one thinner on compassion and grace. There cannot be! Jesus is the Word. He is one with his Father. He is the radiance, the glow, the glory of who his Father is.”¹

And this means that if God is exactly like Jesus (because Jesus is God), then I can interact with God the same way that every sinner interacted with Jesus.

I can be like the man with weak faith who comes to Jesus and says, “I do believe, help my unbelief” and Jesus responds by answering his request. (Mark 9:24).

I can be like the woman caught in adultery, bowing before God, and hear God say, “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” (John 8:11)

I can be like the thief on the cross - a certified criminal, worthy of the death I am dying, and say “Remember me” and know He will invite me into His kingdom (Luke 23:42).

We know what Jesus is like toward sinners like us! He is tender, compassionate, eager to pardon, ready to welcome the thieves and the prostitutes into His kingdom before the religious people.

And Jesus isn’t some alt-God or sub-God - this is what God is like. The WORD WAS GOD. This is Who God is! There’s no dividing who Jesus is from who God is.

Michael Reeves writes that, *“I know just what he is like toward the weak and sick. In him we see the true meaning of the love, the power, the wisdom, the justice and the majesty of God. As we look through this book at Jesus, then, we will not be looking at someone other than God; we will be contemplating God himself. And in fact, if we do not go to this*

¹ Reeves, Michael. Rejoicing in Christ (pp. 14-16). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Word to know God, then all our thoughts about God, however respectful, worshipful or philosophically satisfying, will be nothing but idolatry.”²

Jesus came to us on Christmas as God. He came as the ultimate and final message of God to us, the exact image of God’s character, the radiance of the glory of God. Like a face stamped onto a coin. If I want to know what George Washington looks like, I can look at a quarter, where there’s an imprint. If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus.

So will God hear your prayer of desperation? What would Jesus do?

Will God forgive your deepest, darkest sin? What would Jesus do?

Does God really understand what I’m going through? Did Jesus go through it?

Could God love a sinner who has sinned like I have?

What did Jesus do?

This baby in a manger grew - and took his perfect life to the cross, where He died for all who would believe in Him.

So of course He loves you. Of course He loves you if you repent and turn to Him. He welcomes all who come to Him on His terms. There is nobody too far, nobody unloved. This is what God is like!

And if you say, “I don’t believe in the God of the Bible,” I’d ask, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.”

You would likely describe a god that I don’t believe in either - a god who delights in punishment, a god who is cruel, a god who is aloof and far off, a god who is not understanding, a god who doesn’t care about humanity, a god who offers good but never delivers.

And I’d say, “I don’t believe in the same God you don’t believe in!” The god you’re describing sounds like the devil.

² Reeves, Michael. Rejoicing in Christ (pp. 14-16). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

I believe in a God who took on flesh so He could show the way, who took the punishment we deserve so He could purchase our pardon, a God who is kind and cares so much that He gave His son, a God who is anything but aloof and far off - He took on flesh and was born in one of our towns.

“In the Incarnation, the One on high became low, the Creator became a creature, the Word became speechless, the very power of God became a foetus. The one High Priests trembled to approach was there in the flesh, now with and alongside his people forever.” - Reeves

Our God understands because He has truly been there in Jesus, our God cares so much about humanity that He forever, permanently took on humanity.

In Jesus we have the answer to the big question, “What is God like?”

And in Jesus, we have the answer for the longing in all of our hearts.

We all have this sense that we should be able to experience that which is perfect: perfect peace, perfect joy, perfect contentment, perfect calm about the future.

But none of us have ever fully experienced that. We read books and watch movies and scroll social media looking for something - but we never fully know what we're looking for and never fully find it.

This season, we might think that if we could attain enough of the beauty of this season, or if we could recreate the best nostalgic memory of a time when we think we used to be satisfied, then maybe we could achieve that satisfaction again. And I say again knowing we never really were satisfied.

There's something in all of us that seems like it can never be satisfied. We all have what C.S. Lewis called the “inconsolable secret” - we all have a longing for something we have never fully experienced.

Lewis writes, “The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune

we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”

Jesus is everything we're after, the longing underneath all of our other longings in the longing for Jesus. He's the far off country we've longed for but never visited, the perfect music we've never heard.

God became a man and lived among us. Literally He tabernacled among us - he pitched a tent to house his glory, and that tent was Jesus. And in Jesus we see the God we're after.

And that's what this passage says - all of the incomprehensible goodness of God came to us in Jesus. And now, if He opens our eyes, we can understand it.

And John calls Jesus the "Word". The "logos"

And that term was used in lots of ways in their day. Greek philosophers used it all the time, and people wonder if John drew on their meanings.

But John wasn't a learned philosopher. He was a fisherman. He knew the Bible, but probably didn't go to college in Athens to learn fishing with a minor in philosophy. He learned fishing from his dad. He learned the Bible at home and at synagogue. And he writes his gospel in very simple language - his book is the one kids first memorize passages from and that seminary students first translate into English from Greek. Because it's simple. John is a simple man who was drawing from what he did know, which was the Bible.

In the Bible that he had, when God would speak to a prophet, he would say things like "the word of the Lord came to Isaiah." And then Isaiah would know what God wanted him to tell everyone.

It was a powerful word that Psalm 33 says made the heavens.

When some of God's people were sick and about to die, "God 'sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave' (Psalm 107:20).

God's word was God's powerful message that came and affected human history.

And here, John says, "That message that was powerful enough to create the world, to heal, and to teach us in the past became flesh. And lived here."

John 1: 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

So he says people didn't receive him because our deeds were evil, but those who did receive Him became His children.

God, the great king of the universe, who has always existed, needs nothing, had it all, came to us. To the people that were in darkness and resisted Him.

Now if you didn't know the story, but heard that a king came and they waged war against him, you would assume he would fight the enemy and procure subjects for himself. If a king invaded and went to a hostile land, you either died, or surrendered and became a slave. We'd assume the king wanted something from us, he wanted servants, he wanted slaves.

But this king, Who is Love, came to give. He came to serve.

Jesus did not come to earth in order to make us His servants. He came to earth in order to become our servant. He came to *be* a servant.

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:44–45).

He came to make us sons!

This is a God who saves - not to get more power for himself, but to make a family. And we are that family if we receive Him.

But still, that news is not very good *for us*. We've all done evil deeds, we all love darkness. Yes, if we'll receive him he'll make us sons and daughters. But we don't, we won't. If you've got evil deeds you love the darkness.

That's like saying "God will save you - you just need to jump over this building." I can't do that, that's not good news.

But look what He does to be the God who saves:

John 1: 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

God does a work in the hearts of all who believe to make them reborn. Not because they desired it (they didn't), not because they tried hard, but because God desired them.

This is amazing. God did all of the work.

Between us and eternal life were two great obstacles. One is that we couldn't comprehend God, and the other is that we wanted nothing to do with Him because we were spiritually dead. But God so loved us that he did two things.

He sent His Son to live among us. To get close and show Himself to us so we could clearly see the heart of God. To overcome our innate sinfulness, He sent his Spirit to cause us to be born again, to make us alive and make us pass from death to life. And so he overcomes the first obstacle.

In perfect harmony with the work of his Spirit God sent his Son to die for our sins and remove the guilt of all who believe in him. So the moment we believe in him, even though we are sinners, we are given the right to be called the sons and daughters of God.

This is great news for sinners like you and me. It is exactly what we need.

Applications: Receive Jesus.

For Christians: The one the universe was made for so you can let go of the belief that it all depends on you. The perfect relationship you're after.

Jesus being God with God is great news for our hearts that love control. We feel the need to control relationships and circumstances, to make our world work just the way we think it should, to control our futures, to control our destinies, to make the world work for us. But we can be freed from that pressure to create a designer life if God is the creator.

And if we don't have to sustain every relationship, keep everybody happy, force everything to go well, then we can be far freer than we are. We could put the phone down and not respond to every demand on us knowing that He will take care of everything that needs to be taken care of. This relieves us of the burden of trying to play

God's part in the story, to run the world like its ours, and it enables us to fill the small but significant roles he's handed to each of us.

If God is big, we don't need to be in control. We don't need to be a big deal ourselves, we can be free to be small and obscure and do our part without striving to be what only Jesus can be.

Receive Him as the God who saves. Who got close to us in our sin. Run to Him with your sin - he is light, and life, and love. Who we see in Jesus is who God is. And we can trust Him for salvation.

Prayer:

Assurance:

John 3: 16"For God so loved the world,i that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17**For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.