

I saw a movie about Charles Dickens writing *A Christmas Carol* and it suggested Christmas wasn't really celebrated in England around that time. Whether that's true or not, it got me thinking. Why do we celebrate Christmas? Seriously, why is it so important? That may seem like a silly question, but think about it. We eat the same food every year. We sing the same songs, put up the same decorations, and tell the same stories. Sure, it's about food, fun, friends, family...and "resents". But all that can start to feel really ordinary, and for those who make Christmas about only those things, it may lead someone to ask, "Why do we do this every year?"

But for the believer, for those of you here checking out Christianity or those of you who come on special days like this, we believe there is something more. And if there's a year that we need to celebrate it, this is the year. All season I've been encouraging you to not miss Christmas, and several recent surveys about how we are feeling right now reinforce that point: 50% of all adults say 2021 was the worst year of their lives, 60% say they have never been so tired (the other 40% were too exhausted to tell the truth), and anxiety is at levels not seen since the beginning of the pandemic. And if that wasn't enough, it's going to be about 112 degrees on Christmas Day! This is anything but an ordinary year, so how good is it that we can end it by celebrating what is anything but an ordinary day.

The apostle John summarizes the extraordinary event we celebrate today and tomorrow when he says **[John 1:14a]** <sup>14</sup> **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.** The Word is Jesus and John is proclaiming the incarnation, when God himself took on flesh, became man, and lived among us for a few decades. We sing about it in *O Come All Ye Faithful* with "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing" and *Hark the Herald* with "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity." In Jesus, the invisible has become visible, the divine has become human, the infinite finite, the omnipotent a helpless baby. The magnitude of this moment, this event, simply cannot be exaggerated because it is through this baby that everything changes.

So why do we celebrate Christmas? To worship the God who did this, and to remember what he has done. Tonight, in light of this year, I want to encourage all of us by looking at how God's love, God's compassion, and God's plan are all revealed in the Word made flesh.

**Jesus came to make God known and knowable.** John refers to Jesus as the Word. It is a title for God, in Jewish thought it is used as a self-assertion or expression of God, and in Greek thought it's the rational mind that ruled the universe. That's all very technical, and maybe not compelling. So, to put it more directly, God is saying "Here I am." Through Jesus, God wanted to show us who he is and what he's about, and he did it in a way we can see him with our own eyes.

**[John 1:14]** <sup>14</sup> **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.**

The God of the Old Testament is present with Israel, but in the form of fire or smoke, or hidden behind a curtain. His holiness and otherness is on display, and there is distance and mystery. That's all true in Jesus. He is holy and wholly other. Colossians, which we'll be studying after the first of the year, refers to him as preeminent; supreme, surpassing, first. **But in the birth of Jesus, we are reminded God is also a person, and if he's a person he can be understood,**

**and if he can be understood he can be known, and if he can be known, a relationship is possible; a relationship through which he can express his love.**

I think back to the early days with Martha. I wanted to dwell among her all the time because I wanted her to know me and wanted a relationship with her. It wouldn't have worked if I stayed distant or mysterious. So I drew near (as often as she let me) and she, not surprisingly, ultimately found me irresistible, and the rest is history.

We celebrate Christmas to remember God has drawn near. He is Emmanuel, God with us, and he's with us because he wants a relationship with us. Christmas is a declaration Jesus thought you worth it to come all the way from the perfection of heaven to the mess we know as earth to make himself known, and an invitation for you to know him intimately. Have you gotten to know him? Perhaps this Christmas is the start of him showing you how much he loves you.

A primary way he expresses that love is through compassion. Jesus came so we can relate to him. **Jesus also came so that he can relate to us.** Did Jesus need to be born to know us? No. He's our creator. He knows us better than we know ourselves. But when he took on flesh, he lived a full human life. He experienced all we experience, and that's good news after a year like this.

**[Hebrews 4:15] <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.**

Every Christmas we remember Jesus started his life in a feeding trough for animals. He experienced want, injustice, oppression, pain, rejection, sickness, betrayal, and death, and all along he was tempted to deviate from the path the Father had him on.

You ever believe you're the only one going through difficulty? No one will understand. There's no one to talk to about it. When you think your suffering is unique, it adds to the pain. Christmas reminds us that's simply not true. **Jesus was born to redeem our suffering, but he began by joining us in it first.** When we experience fear, he's been there. When we experience pain, he's been there. When we feel the weight of the world on our shoulders, he's been there. When we face the death of ourselves or someone we love, he's been there. We celebrate Christmas to remember, because he took on flesh, he's been through it all. And because he's been through it all, he desires to compassionately minister to us in our pain. Have you been trying to tough it out alone? You don't have to. He knows what you're going through and he wants to help.

**Jesus came to dwell among us temporarily so he could dwell among us permanently.**

**[John 1:11-13] <sup>11</sup> He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**

Christmas tells us Jesus came to build, or rebuild, the family of God. From the beginning, God's desire has been to dwell with his people. But something was keeping us apart. We know that

kind of separation these days. Christmas is a family holiday. We want to be together, but this virus has kept us apart a lot. The Presslers are experiencing that loss this Christmas. But just like Covid, the virus of our sin separated us from God. It got in the way, prevented him from dwelling with us and it brought death and darkness to all of creation that we live in every day.

But we celebrate today because, on Christmas, Jesus began to live the life we couldn't live, and he began the journey to the cross where he would die the death we deserved. Three days later, his physical body would rise from the dead in victory over what kept us apart from God. If you believe in that, he makes you his child, part of the family, and the beneficiary of the hopeful future he will return to create.

**[Revelation 21:3] <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.**

He dwelled with us temporarily so that he can dwell with us permanently. At Christmas, we celebrate what Jesus has done in his first advent to hope in what he will do in his second. It is our annual reminder that he was born to die, to take on flesh in order to take care of what kept us apart. All this mess we are in? It won't last forever.

Do you believe that? If you are here and you've never stepped into that hope, I invite you to do that now. How? Believe that Jesus is God, that he died for your sins and rose again. When you do, you too will be a child of God, part of the family, and the owner of the hope we celebrate tonight.

You know, tomorrow, we are all going to wake up and it's likely not much will be different from when we went to bed. We may still be tired, worn out, concerned at the state of the world. But that's not a statement of hopelessness. The darkness does not define our lives. Why? Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John says it this way.

**[John 1:4-5] <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

Jesus came so that we could know God. He came so that he could care for us. And he came so that we could be together forever. And when we celebrate this day, this Savior, it makes much of him and fills us with hope, joy, and peace. So we close this evening by lighting the last advent candle, a reminder that his light shines in our lives, and a reminder that we can shine that light in others.