

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 30, 2018
First Sunday after Christmas
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147
Galatians 3:23-4:7
John 1:1-18

Once there was a man who did not believe in God or in religious holidays like Christmas. His wife, however, was a believer, and she tried diligently to teach the faith to her children in spite of the opposition she often got from her husband.

One snowy Christmas Eve, the wife prepared to take the children to Christmas Eve service in the farm community where they lived.

She asked him, “Won’t you please come with us to Christmas Eve service?”

He bluntly refused. “The whole Christmas story is nonsense,” he stated.

“Why would God lower himself to come to earth as a man? It’s ludicrous.”

So she and the children ventured out into the snow, and he remained at the farm house to enjoy the evening in front of the fire.

Before long, the snow was falling heavily and the winds were howling. The man looked out his window to see a blinding snowstorm as he settled down in front of the fire.

Then he heard a loud thump. Something had hit the window. Suddenly, there was another thump. He got up and looked out the window, but could not see more than a few feet.

So he ventured outside to see what could have hit his window. In the field adjacent to his house he saw a flock of wild geese. They had been flying south for the winter when they were caught in the storm. They were now lost and stranded, and without food or shelter. The man watched as they flapped their wings and flew aimlessly around the field in low circles.

He felt sorry for the geese and wanted to help them. He looked over and saw his barn through the blowing snow. He knew it would be a great place for the geese to wait out the storm.

He walked over to his barn and opened the doors as wide as he could get them. He watched and waited, hoping the geese would fly inside. But the poor creatures seemed oblivious to his overtures. He tried to get their attention, but he scared them and they moved farther away.

So he went into the house and got some bread. He broke it up into crumbs, making a bread trail that led directly into the barn. But the geese still didn't catch on.

Exasperated, the man now circled in behind the scared creatures and tried to "shoo" them toward the barn. But to no avail.

“Why won’t you follow me?” he bellowed. “Can’t you see that this is the only safe place where you can survive the storm? Can’t you see that this is your only hope?”

He sat down, cold and tired. “It’s no use,” he thought. “There’s no way I can get them to safety.”

And then an idea struck him. He lectured himself out loud: *“If only I were a goose, I could get through to them, I could save them.”*

He went into the barn and found one of his own geese. He carried it out in his arms and circled behind the flock of geese. Then he released the goose from his arms, and watched it fly through the others straight toward the barn. And as it did, the others followed it to safety.

As the man closed the barn door in silence, the words he had said just minutes earlier rang in his ears: *“If only I were a goose, I could get through to them, I could save them.”*

At that moment, he remembered standing near the back door of the house as his wife and kids prepared to leave for church. He remembered his condescending words: “Why on earth would God want to become like us? What a ludicrous notion!”

What a crazy idea, indeed! John captures something of this in one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture, the prologue to his Gospel. In language that is at the same time both simple and sublime, he describes how the second Person of the Godhead became a flesh-and-blood human being, and entered the world in disguise. Eugene Peterson renders John's words this way: *The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.* (*The Message*)

The problem with God becoming human and moving into the neighborhood, says John, is that no one recognizes *who it is that has come into their midst*. Mary and Joseph get it, of course. And there are a few others. But for the most part, most simply don't see it, because the last thing the world is expecting is for God to show up as a tiny, vulnerable, new-born baby.

So, in his profound way, John captures the irony when he says: *Light has come to shine in the darkness, but the darkness cannot comprehend it.* God has come to us, but we fail to recognize Him. We lack a mental category to make sense of *how God comes to us*.

Such is the mystery of Christmas, and of our faith. Why does God choose to work in ways that seem ludicrous to our human wisdom? Why does God defy our conventional ways of thinking and our airtight systems of thought?

Maybe it's because God is not as interested in *impressing* us as He is in *saving* us.

Isaiah said it like this:

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Is. 9:2, 6)

The angel announced it to the shepherds like this:

Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

And for all those through the centuries who have been crazy enough to believe this, life has never been the same.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.