

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 1, 2017
First Sunday after Christmas
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147:13-21
Galatians 3:23-4:7
John 1:1-18

On this cold, first Sunday after Christmas, I am faced with a bit of a dilemma as a preacher. We're a little more than half way through the twelve days of Christmas, and so the story of Christmas is fresh on our minds. Luke's account of Christ's birth has been read twice, and we sing many of the traditional Christmas hymns during this time.

All of this is enough to produce a serious "warm and fuzzy" feeling in us. The look on many of your faces as we sing the Christmas hymns confirms this. The story of Christ's birth can produce a sort of dreamy, happy, "feel good" mindset in us. And this is not altogether a bad thing. We have images of shepherds, angels, a little baby, and everything that goes with it. It's hard *not* to have a warm, fuzzy feeling about all of that.

But the dilemma for me is that I wonder whether, when it comes to the meaning of Christmas, *we settle for too little*. Matthew and Luke give us the *facts* of Christmas. They report things as they occurred. But they do not give us the *meaning* of those facts. And the meaning of Christmas is deep and inexhaustible.

So if Matthew and Luke report to us the *facts* of Christmas, where do we go to probe in a deeper way the *meaning* of Christmas? One answer to that is the Gospel of John. If Matthew and Luke report the facts of Christmas to us, John seeks to tell us what those facts *mean*. This is particularly true of the first chapter of John's Gospel, which we encounter today.

We could spend an entire year on this passage, so in the interest of time I will focus today on a single phrase in verse 14. In that verse John says something that is an amazing claim, and helps to distinguish Christianity from all other religions. It is not only an amazing claim, it is (or was then) a *scandalous* claim. John tells us that the eternal God, the Creator of the universe, *became flesh*. The eternal God, the Creator of the universe, *became a human being*. The divine Creator of all that is has become *human*, and therefore *vulnerable*. And not merely vulnerable, but *killable*.

In 1964 a woman by the name of Kitty Genovese was brutally assaulted and murdered outside of her apartment building Queens, New York. Reports still vary as to what exactly happened, but as Genovese's attacker began stabbing her, she cried out for help. As many as 30 people apparently heard her screams, and numerous lights went on in the apartment complex (that attack happened in the middle of the night). But no one came to her aid. In fact, when the lights went on in many of the apartments, the attacker stopped his assault. But after five minutes

or so when no one came, he came back and began beating and stabbing his victim once again.

Psychologists later came up with the phrase “the bystander effect” to describe what happened on that fateful night in March of 1964. The most pressing question, of course, was: *Why did no one come to the aid of this woman?*

One answer to that question is that anyone who would have come down from that apartment complex to help this woman would have been putting his or her life at risk. And that’s a frightening and serious thing. *To come down was to risk your life.*

John tells us that the divine Creator, the eternal Word of God, *came down to us and for us.* Into a world marred and scarred by rebellion, violence, and pain, Jesus heard our cries, and *he came down.* But in Jesus’ case, coming down involved more than just the awareness that he was putting his life at risk. In Jesus’ case, coming down meant that *Jesus knew full well* that it would *cost him his life.* He was not merely putting his life at risk. He was laying his life down.

There is a marvelous passage in Hebrews 2 where the writer talks about how it was necessary that God become human in Jesus in order to fulfill the divine plan.

Near the end of the chapter the writer says:

For this reason he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered,

when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:17-18)

The meaning of Christmas is inexhaustible. But when John says that the eternal God became a vulnerable human being, one of the things that Christmas means is that the eternal God knows you and understands you *because He has been where you've been*. Whatever you have faced and experienced in your life, Jesus has faced it and experienced it.

Have you ever felt alone? So has Jesus. Have you ever felt rejected and misunderstood? So has Jesus. Have you ever been flat broke? So has Jesus. Jesus has experienced it all.

Many years ago a distraught man sat in my study and poured out his heart to me. He said: "I experienced the worst crisis of my life. I was at the end of my rope. I cried out to God in desperation. I prayed, I cried, I begged God to help me. And God didn't answer. God abandoned me."

I didn't know what to say. Words failed me. Perhaps some of you have had a friend or an acquaintance say the same thing to you.

But this week I thought of Christmas. I thought about what John says here. And it occurred to me that people with these sorts of issues must surely place their struggles within the context of a man who made a similar plea in a Garden in the middle of the night, whose cries to God were so intense that his sweat fell to the

ground like drops of blood. A man who cried from the depths of anguish for God to help him. A man who in the end cried out: “God, why have you forsaken me?”

The meaning of Christmas is inexhaustible. But for any who have ever cried out and said: “God abandoned me. God didn’t answer my prayer. God turned his back on me,” Christmas reminds us that God knows exactly how that feels.

During Advent, Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as the “Wonderful Counselor.” Our Advent and Christmas hymns also allude to this. Now, from your human experience, what kind of people make the best counselors?

Most of us would say that the best counselors are those who have experienced the same things that their clients are experiencing. Because they have lived those same experiences, they are able to help their clients through those issues.

Don’t you find this true in your own life? When friends or family come to you or are struggling with a problem, when is it that you are more able to speak with wisdom and authority in those situations? When you have experienced something similar yourself, right?

Christmas reminds us that wherever you’ve been, whatever you’ve experienced, whatever you may be going through in your life – Jesus fully understands, because he has been there. Knowing full well that his coming down to help you would cost him his life, he came down. And when it came to the point

where coming down to help you put Jesus in a position where he felt abandoned and rejected by God, *he came down*. The eternal Word became flesh, and dwelled among us.

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to let Jesus be your “Wonderful Counselor.” Let him in to your life with all of its messiness and confusion. And remember: Jesus not only “came down” at Bethlehem; he comes to us in these concrete elements of bread and wine, infusing us with his grace and mercy and power.

So come with faith. Come with gratitude that the divine Creator has “come down” to us. And give thanks that He still does.

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

[I am indebted to Rev. Tim Keller for the bulk of the content of this sermon. Rev. Keller preached this sermon in December of 2009 at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.]