

HE BECAME ONE OF US

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Dec. 10, 2017
based on John 1:1-5, 14; I John 4:9-16***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of an Advent sermon series entitled, “God Turns the Tables,” during which we are considering how the Christmas message in many ways reverses our typical human thoughts about ourselves and about God. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Mavis and I used to have a large fish tank in our house. Tropical fish are pretty, and they were mildly entertaining for our children when they were small. But fish are also a lot of bother. They make a mess in the tank. They take a lot of maintenance. And they do really dumb things. Fish are always picking on each other. They eat too much; if you’re not careful, some fish will eat so much they make themselves sick. And I’m sure they never really knew who I was—just a distant hazy figure that they vaguely associated with food.

It occurred to me once that if I really wanted to transform the lot of my tropical fish, the thing to do—if I somehow had the power—would be for me to actually become a fish. Then I could enter into their fish world, where I could communicate with them on their level. I could guide them to new ways of living, and I could let them know who I am and establish a whole new kind of relationship with them. But of course that would also mean that I would have to start living inside their crummy little fish environment, and in the midst of all their foolishness. I would have to eat fish food, and probably get picked on by the bigger, nastier fish. I quickly concluded that even if I had the power, I would never choose to become a fish.

We finally got rid of the fish tank. Our kids lost interest in it, and it was too much of a hassle.

How does God look upon our world? Human beings do a lot of dumb things, we are always picking on each other, and we make a mess of the world God created for us. You might think that one day God would decide to just ditch the whole project.

But God became one of us. God entered into our world, in order to transform our existence. As the gospel of John puts it, “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” (John 1:14) God came into our environment, to show us how to live, and to help us to know that vague, distant figure that we sense is the source of all things. God came to us in Jesus, to reveal to us who God truly is, and to establish a whole new relationship with us, and to show us finally the purpose and destiny that God has for us.

Sometimes people wonder how God could actually become a human being. Does this mean that God had to shrink down into a human life, leaving the universe at large untended? John answers this question at the start of his gospel when he says that Christ is the light shining into our darkness. When sunlight strikes us, the sun remains strong as ever in the sky. The light is energy from the sun that comes to us and touches us. Likewise God, who reigns forever on high, comes to us in Christ to touch and enlighten us. We can speak of God the

Father and Christ the Son as though they are two separate entities, just as we can speak of the sun and a beam of sunlight as being distinct; yet in a fundamental way the sun and the beam of light emanating from the sun are one and the same. So also, Christ is God entering among us, connecting directly with us, like a beam of light flooding the darkness. A similar image is conveyed when John says that Christ is the Word of God. Again we can think of God as the speaker and Christ as the word that actually reaches us. The speaker and the word are in some sense distinct, yet in reality the word is the expression of the speaker. So Christ is the self-expression of God, as God communicates directly to us. With such images the gospel helps us to visualize how God can reign over all and at the same time enter our world and dwell among us.

Yet in the end the question of *how* God could enter our world in human form is really not such a difficult question, since, after all, God can do anything. The much larger question is, “Why would God become a human being?” Why would God plunge into the limitation and pain and foolishness of our human condition? Why would God subject himself to being bullied by other human beings? Why would God endure the suffering brought about by all our human brokenness? The answer is that God must care for us—a whole lot more than I ever cared about my fish! God cares for us so much that God has entered into our world and joined fully in our life. The gospel of John makes this point later when it says that “God so loved the world that God gave His Son . . . (John 3:16)

Sometimes wonder about whether God really cares. People look at the world around us and see all sorts of trouble and brokenness, and they wonder where God is. Philip Yancey, in a book entitled, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, related a story once along this line, about a migrant woman who had quite an experience one day in church. She told this account:

“Last year we went to a little church in New Jersey. We had all our children there, the baby included. The Reverend told us to be quiet. He told us how glad we should be that we are in this country, because it is Christian, and not godless.

Then my husband went and lost his temper. Something happened to his nerves, I do believe. He got up and started shouting. He went up to the Reverend and told him to shut up and never speak again—not to us, the migrant people. He told him to leave us alone and don’t be standing up there looking like he was nice to be doing us a favor.

Then he did the worst thing he could do; he took the baby, Annie, and he held her right before the minister’s face, and he screamed and shouted and hollered at him. He told him that here was our little Annie, and she’s never been to a doctor, and the child is sick . . . and we’ve got no money, not for Annie or the other ones or ourselves. Then he lifted Annie up so she was higher than the Reverend, and he said why doesn’t he go pray for Annie and pray that the growers will be punished for what they’re doing to us, all the migrant people . . . and then my husband began shouting about God and His neglecting us while He took such good care of the other people all over.

Then the Reverend did answer—and that was his mistake, yes it was. He said that we

should be careful and not start blaming God and criticizing God and complaining to Him like that, because God wasn't supposed to be taking care of the way the growers behave and how we live here on this earth. "God worries about your future"; that's what he said, and I tell you, my husband near exploded. He took Annie and pushed her near the reverend's face and Annie, she started crying, poor child, and he asked the reverend about Annie's "future" and asked him what he'd do if he had to live like us, and if he had a future like ours.

Then he held our Annie as high as he could right near the cross, and he told God that He'd better stop having preachers speak for Him, that He should come and see us for Himself . . . God should come and see us for Himself." [Yancey, pp. 226-227]

In the man's rage and questioning, he became himself the preacher, and proclaimed the answer to his own question. Holding his crying baby next to the cross, he declared that God should come among us and see for Himself.

The theological word for this is incarnation—the coming of God in human form. The message of the gospel is that God has come among us; and it is not simply that God has masqueraded through the world in human costume, but rather that God truly became a human being—the Word became flesh—God took our human nature upon himself and shared fully in our human limitations and needs and sufferings. God entered the world as a crying baby and ended his sojourn on the cross. As the prophet Isaiah expressed it centuries before Jesus, "He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." (Isaiah 53:3)

What this says to us is that we are not alone. God understands our human condition, because God has entered into that condition; God is truly with us, and because God has joined with us, we can have the confidence that God will uphold us and will finally bring us out of our brokenness into the wholeness of God's Kingdom.

So whenever, like the man in that story, we wonder where God is, and why God has not taken care of our immediate need, the story of Christmas declares an answer far greater than what one might expect. Through the ages people have often looked for divine assistance and have hoped that God might provide help for one problem or another. But the gospel declares that God has actually become one of us; and this message is transformational.

Some years ago, in 1995, Joan Osborne sang a song that became a top 40 hit that year—it was called "What If God Was One of Us?"

"What if God was one of us?" she sings, "Just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on a bus, trying to make his way home?"

She continues, "If God had a face what would it look like? And would you want to see if, seeing meant that you would have to believe in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets?" She continues with a "God is great, God is good" refrain, and then goes on, "What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home?"

In Jesus, God became one of us—He became "incarnate"—and that fact tells us seven

essential truths about ourselves and about God.

It tells us first of all, as we have seen, that God cares for us. The coming of God to us in Jesus is a profound declaration of the deep love that God has for us.

It tells us further that we are of infinite value to God. Sometimes people today want to argue that human beings are just a random mass of biological material, just perishable beasts that soon turn back into dust. But although we may see ourselves as small and very imperfect, or just slobs as the song put it, the fact that God joins with our human nature tells us that in God's eyes there is something very special about humanity, there is a deep spiritual affinity between ourselves and God. We are children of God and are meant to live in fellowship with God.

Along that line, the incarnation also tells us that other people around us are of infinite value. The stranger on the bus is a human being with whom God has joined in the incarnation, and thus we are moved to see Christ in everyone, and treat all persons as being of infinite worth.

The incarnation also tells us what God is like. In that song, there is the question, "If God had a face, what would it look like?" In fact, we see the face of God in Jesus. The coming of God in human form reveals to us the character of God; and we see in Jesus how God is compassionate and merciful, and how God reaches to us with grace.

But then the song continues, "And would you want to see, if seeing meant you would have to believe." So the incarnation calls us to faith, for as we encounter God in Jesus, we are drawn to put our trust in God and to live in real connection with God.

Then then means that the incarnation also impels us into service in the world; for if God is so concerned about our world that God enters into it and takes on suffering in order to redeem it, then we are challenged to likewise be concerned about the world and go out into it to be instruments of God help in our time. Or as it is said in the first letter of John, "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (I John 4:11)

Finally, the incarnation speaks to our destiny. In the birth of Jesus, divinity is joined to humanity, and so we are destined for everlasting union with God. As Irenaeus, one of the early theologians of the church, put it, "The Word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for humankind, became what we are in order to make us what He is."

In the end, the story of Christmas tells us that God relates to our world in a way utterly different from how I related to my fish tank. God does not just view us from afar—with amusement, or disgust—at our behavior. God looks on us with love, and God acts in love to join with us, in order to redeem us and enable us to live forever in the light of God. In Christ, God is truly with us; and so, as John said, "we know and believe the love that God has for us." (I John 4:16)