

## / CHILD

Do you guys know what 'Joy' is? (Let them answer.) Have you ever worked really hard to accomplish a task? (bike riding, reading, math equations, etc.) Did you ever want to give up because it was so hard? How did you feel after you learned the task? Really, really happy? Joyful? That joy we feel is wonderful, isn't it?

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is "Joy to the World." Jesus came to the world and brought joy. That doesn't mean that suddenly everything was wonderful forever. It means that if we love Jesus and accept the joy that he brought to the world, he will help us through the hard things in our lives and we will live with him forever in heaven where joy never stops. When you hear the Christmas carol, "Joy to the World" sung, remember that the way to joy is through Jesus. He came to bring joy forever.

## Adult

There is a reading by J. B. Phillips called *The Visited Planet*. It's about a junior angel who is being given a tour of the universe by a senior angel. After touring all the galaxies of the universe, they come at last to our solar system. The junior angel is tired and bored and not very impressed by what he sees. The senior angel points to the earth and says, "Keep an eye on that planet."

The younger angel thinks the earth looks small and dirty and insignificant.

"That is the Visited Planet," say the senior angel.

"You don't mean ..." the junior angel begins to interject . . .

"Yes," the senior angel replies, "that planet has been visited by our young Prince of Glory."

"Do you mean to tell me that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?" asks the junior angel incredulously.

"I do," the senior angel replies, "and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The junior angel has no reply. The very thought is beyond his comprehension

The last place I expected graffiti was on the door of a church. Serving as a minister to a growing, suburban congregation afforded little time to oneself. Consequently, I would often withdraw to a room at the opposite end of the building. There I was free of most interruptions and distractions.

Not ostentatious but etched in the brown door at eye level were three words: GOD WAS HERE. Obviously an innocent gag, probably written by one of the creative teenagers with whom I worked. Admittedly, reading such a statement in a church does make one slightly uncomfortable.

A week later I returned to my place of quiet. I needed peace from the frustrations of a crowded day. I noticed that the graffiti had been tampered. Altering graffiti occurs on buildings and bridges, but in a church?! But there it was, not blatant, but changed. And better yet, my training confirmed, more theologically accurate. For someone had crossed out "was" and written above it "is". In a quiet room the message of Christmas was proclaimed: GOD IS HERE.

It was the message that the angels announced, that the shepherd's heard, that the wise men sought, that Herod feared, that the world did not even notice. It was the message that Mary cradled and that Joseph admired. It was the message wrapped in cloths. It was the little baby Jesus.

"God is here" is the message of Christmas

Jesus, God's one and only Son, became a man. He was God in a suit of flesh. He was the visible expression of the invisible deity. God was expressing Himself in a language that we could understand. God was identifying with the frailties and tragedies of the human race. God was getting up close and personal. God was announcing to the world: "I'm here!"

God became a man. The omnipotent, in one instant, made himself breakable. He who had been spirit became pierceable. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And He who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl.

The apostle John used one word to embody this revelation of God. Theologians may write long books to explain the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus, but John epitomizes it in a single word — dwelt. "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Eugene Petersen in *The Message* paraphrases this verse, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). Dwelt meant "to live in a

tent”.

In the Old Testament this word dwelt and its derivatives literally denote “residence.” Often the word was used to depict the glorious presence of God that resided in the tabernacle and Solomon’s temple. So when Jesus became flesh and blood He moved into the neighborhood; He took up residence;

Before Jesus was born God visited His people performing mighty and miraculous works. God’s people would stack stones or build a monument or erect a synagogue in honor of God’s revelation. The physical erection of monuments and buildings was their way of saying, “God was here.” The power and presence of God had visited them in a place, and so in order not to forget they constructed a reminder. But when Jesus entered the world the verb tense changed from past to present — from “was” to “is.”

Because of Jesus’ birth, because of the incarnation of God, because the Word became flesh, we now say: “God is here.” God is present in all of His splendor and glory. We don’t have to erect structures to remind us of God’s visited presence. God is already here.

“God is here” is more than a theological doctrine, it has practical implications. What does “God is here” mean to us?

Jesus became a man to show us God

When Jesus became a man He showed that God was not merely a principle but a person. Jesus was not an idea of God, not a picture of God, but God Himself in human form.

Two young men on a battlefield in World War II made it to the safety of a foxhole in the midst of enemy fire. As they looked out before them across the battlefield they perceived the horror of dead and dying men, twisted barbed wire, the earth scarred with deep holes left by cannon fire. Men lifeless, others crying out for help. Finally one of the men cried: “Where in the world is God?” As they continued to watch and listen they soon noticed two medics, identified by the red cross on their arms and their helmets, carefully making their way across the perilous scene. As they watched, the medics stopped and began to load a wounded soldier onto their stretcher. Once loaded they began to work their way to safety. As the scene unfolded before them, the other soldier now boldly answered the honest, but piercing question of his friend, “There is God! There is God!” When Jesus became a man He came to show us God. He came in the midst of the loneliness and the horror of a world gone mad. Yet in the chaos and confusion Jesus announced that God is here. Where in the world is God? God is here in Christ. Christ has come among us to show us who God is and what God is. Jesus shows us God in a way that we can understand. In a way that renews us. In a way that gives us hope.

Jesus became a man to feel our hurt

In one act of becoming human He identified with our pain. The pain of loneliness, He felt it. The hurt of rejection, He felt it. The sadness of losing a loved one to death, He felt it. The scars of mental or physical abuse, He felt it.

When we suffer pain, we want others to understand. We want others to be like us so they can identify with us. We don’t want to be alone. We want others to feel our pain and our hurt. When Jesus became a man He understood us; He identified with us; He felt our pain, and He hurt.

Joseph Damien was a nineteenth-century missionary who ministered to people with leprosy on the island of Molokai, Hawaii. Those suffering grew to love him and revered the sacrificial life he lived out before them. One morning before Damien was to lead daily worship he was pouring some hot water into a cup when the water swirled out and fell onto his bare foot. It took him a moment to realize that he had not felt any sensation. Gripped by the sudden fear of what this could mean, he poured more hot water on the same spot. No feeling whatsoever. Damien immediately knew what had happened. As he walked tearfully to deliver his sermon, no one at first noticed the difference in his opening line. He normally began every sermon with, “My fellow believers.” But this morning he began with, “My fellow lepers.”

In a greater measure Jesus came into this world knowing what it would cost Him. He bore in His pure being the marks of evil, that we might be pure. He bore in His sinless soul the weight of sin, so that we could be forgiven. He bore in His manly frame the hurt and pain of injustice, that we might be understood.

God is here. He is here understanding our hurt, identifying with our pain. He feels. He hurts. He cries.

Jesus became a man so God becomes touchable, approachable and reachable. Often when we refer to God’s location we point upward or look toward the heavens. Most often we think of God as being up there, far removed from the cares and concerns of this created world. But because Jesus became a man God came down here, living in our midst. We could never reach Him up there, but in love He came down here to us. He became touchable, approachable and reachable.

Listen to what Max Lucado wrote, “‘Just call Me Jesus,’ you can almost hear Him say. He was the kind of fellow you’d invite to watch the Rams- Giants game at your house. He’d wrestle on the floor with your kids, doze on your couch and cook steaks on your grill. He’d laugh at your jokes and tell a few of His own. And when

you spoke, He'd listen to you as if He had all the time in eternity."

Make no mistake about it, people loved being around Jesus. They came at night; they touched Him as He walked down the street; they followed Him around the sea; they invited Him into their homes and placed their children at His feet. Why? Because He refused to be a statue in a cathedral or a priest in an elevated pulpit. He chose instead to be Jesus. Deity dressed in humanity. God, here among us.

As you read the gospels there is not a hint of one person who was afraid to draw near Him. There was not one person who was reluctant to approach Him for fear of being rejected. Remember that. Remember that the next time you find yourself amazed at your own failures. Or the next time guilt burns holes in your stomach. Or the next time you see a cold church or hear a lifeless sermon. Remember that it is man who creates the distance. It is Jesus who builds the bridge.

I suspect that this Christmas you will receive many gifts — some you probably don't need, most you could live without. But there is one present you can't live without. The one present you need is the presence of Jesus Christ. The One who shows us God. The One who feels our hurt. The One who is touchable, approachable and reachable. The God that is here.

Do you remember Louis Cassels' famous parable of the birds? It was Christmas Eve and the man's wife and children were getting ready to go to church. He wasn't going. "I simply can't understand what Christmas is all about, this claim that God became man," he told his wife.

It had been snowing all day and it was beginning to snow harder as the man's family rode off to church without him. He drew a chair up to the fireplace and began to read his newspaper.

A few minutes later, there was a thudding sound at the kitchen window. When he went to investigate, he found a flock of birds out in the back yard. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, were trying to fly through the kitchen window. He was a very kind man so he tried to think of something he could do so the birds wouldn't freeze. "The barn!" he thought. That would be a nice shelter.

He put on his coat and overshoes and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn and opened the door wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in. Food will bring them in he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail to the barn.

But the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shoing them into the barn by walking around waving his arms. They scattered in every direction except into the warm, lighted barn. "They find me a strange and terrifying creature," he said to himself, "and I can't seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me."

Puzzled and dismayed, he pondered this thought, "If only I could be a bird myself for the moment, perhaps I could lead them to safety." If only I could be a bird myself . . .

Just then the church bells began to ring, pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. The man stood silently for a minute, then sank to his knees in the snow.

"Now I understand," he whispered as he lifted his gaze to the sky. "Now I see why You had to become man."

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It was a Christmas pageant presented by a class of four-year-olds and it was an evening to remember. It began with the three virgin Marys marching out onto the stage. As they stood there, they, of course, were waving to their parents. It's not every Christmas pageant that has three virgin Marys, but over the years the school had acquired three Mary costumes, and so, quite naturally the script was revised. This gave a chance for more children to be involved and kept down the squabbling over who got the starring roles. The two Josephs walked up behind the Marys. Then twenty little angels came out. They were dressed in white robes and huge gauze wings. They were followed by twenty little shepherd boys, dressed in burlap sacks. They carried an array of objects that were supposed to be crooks.

"It was at this point that the problem occurred. During the dress rehearsal the teacher had used chalk to draw circles on the floor to mark where the angels were supposed to stand and crosses to mark the spots of the shepherds. But the children had practiced with their regular clothes on. So, on the night of the pageant, the angels came walking out with their beautiful gauze wings and stood on their circles. However, their huge wings covered the crosses of the shepherds as well. So when the time

came for the shepherds to find their places, they did not know where to go because the angels took up all their space.

“There was one little boy who became extremely frustrated and angry over the whole experience. He finally spied his teacher behind the curtains and shocked everyone when he said in a loud stage whisper heard by everyone, ‘Because of these blankety-blank angels, I can’t find the cross!’” (1)

He didn’t say, “blankety-blank,” but we are in church, after all.

I wonder if that can’t happen sometimes? The romantic elements of Christmas the shepherds, the wise men, the angels, the star in the East not to mention the commercialism of Christmas have a tendency to obscure the important meaning of it all, and particularly the message of the cross.

That is why it might be healthy for us on this Christmas Day to turn to the prologue to John’s Gospel for our scripture lesson. There are no angels, no shepherds, no star, not even Mary and Joseph. Instead there is some of the most beautiful and important theological language ever written: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (NIV)

No shepherds, no angels, no star yet here ultimately is the story of Christmas.

This story says, first of all, that Christmas is not an act of humanity, but of God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” When we could do nothing for ourselves, God stepped in to save us.

A man by the name of Bob Considine tells of the time he accompanied an infant Vietnamese orphan to the U.S. so she could be adopted after the Vietnam War. On the long flight to the U.S. the baby’s eyes overflowed with tears, but she made absolutely no sound. Considine found a stewardess and asked her what the problem was. The stewardess had seen war orphans before, and was quick to tell Considine that this was normal. As she said, “the reason they don’t make noise when they cry is because they learned a long time ago that nobody will come.” (2)

What a sad story. A child quits crying when she learns that no one will come. It could be our story. But it is not our story because of the babe in the manger. Christmas is not an act of humanity, but of God.

This story says, in the second place, that God acted in the only way God could act. “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

Why could the darkness not understand him? Why did the world not receive him? The problem is quite clear.

If you can imagine the difference between a keeper of an aquarium and the fish in that aquarium, then you might begin to understand the difference between humanity and God. God is Spirit. Have you ever seen a spirit? God is the creator of a universe that may be billions of light years wide. Can you even begin to imagine a Being of that extraordinary Power and Knowledge? How could God even speak to us without scaring us to death?

Dr. Daniel Paul Matthews, rector of Trinity Church, delivered a message on Christmas Eve, 2001, at St. Paul's Chapel, New York City. This was in the year that the World Trade Center was destroyed by terrorist on 9-11. St. Paul's is very close to Ground Zero. And yet, in that message he expressed God's solution to the gulf that exists between Absolute Power and human need in a beautiful way:

Pretend something like this happened for a moment: The angel Gabriel got back to heaven and rushed up to God and said, "I've got good news, and I've got bad news."

And God said, "Well, give me the good news first."

"The good news is," said the angel, "mission accomplished. I've visited those people you told me to visit. I told them what you told me to tell them. And it's all accomplished."

God said, "So what's the bad news?"

"The bad news," the angel said, "is that those people down there on earth are terrified of you. Every time I visited someone I had to start it off with 'fear not,' because they got so frightened that you were coming close."

God said to the angel, "That's the reason I have to carry out the plan I've made."

"You see," he said to the angel, "I need to go to earth because my people are so frightened. They are so full of fear that I've got to bring the message that they no longer need to be afraid."

The angel said, "And how are you going to do that, since they're so fearful?"

God said, "There's one place on earth that people are not afraid: that one remaining place is a little baby. My people on earth are not afraid of a baby. When a baby is born they rejoice and give thanks without fear because that's the only place left in their lives where they're not afraid. So I will go to earth. I will become a little baby, and they will receive me with no fear at all, because that's the one place my people have no fear." (3)

God acted in the only way God could act without overwhelming us and taking away our freedom. God became a tiny babe. Christmas is an act of God. In Christmas God acted in the only way God could have acted.

And, finally, in Christmas God gave to us the greatest gift God could give us—God told us who we are.

Have you ever received a Christmas gift that you knew was not well thought out? Someone sent it to you just to get the gift-giving over and done with. Oh, you've sent a gift like that?

Some of you will remember a Democratic presidential candidate of many years ago named Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson was a respected politician who had the misfortune to run against a genuine war hero, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower.

There is a hilarious story that is told on Adlai Stevenson. When he was working in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, he wrote a marketing agreement for the walnut industry. That Christmas the industry thanked him by sending him an enormous gunnysack full of packages of walnuts. This generous gift came at just the right time because Stevenson had not done his Christmas shopping. Happily he took these packages of walnuts and sent them to all his Washington friends. Then he made the awful discovery. In each of the individual packages was a little card saying, "Merry Christmas from the walnut industry to Adlai Stevenson." He should have known better. At least, he should have examined one of the packages of walnuts before he started sending them out. But he was in a hurry and did not give much thought to what he was doing. We do that sometimes, don't we? Give gifts without much thought to them?

Not so with God. God knew right from the beginning what He was doing. God gave us what we most needed. God told us who we are. "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." That's who we are children of God. When we know that, the meaning and purpose of life changes.

Marjorie Tallcott was married and had one child during the Great Depression. The family managed to scrape their way through, but as Christmas approached one year Marjorie and her husband were disappointed that they would not be able to buy any presents. A week before Christmas they explained to their six-year-old son, Pete, that there would be no store-bought presents this Christmas. "But I'll tell you what we can do," said Pete's father, "we can make pictures of the presents we'd like to give to each other."

That was a busy week. Marjorie and her husband set to work. Christmas Day arrived and the family rose to find their skimpy little tree made magnificent by the picture presents they had adorned it with. There was luxury beyond imagination in those pictures a black limousine and red speedboat for Dad, a diamond bracelet and fur coat for Mom, a camping tent and a swimming pool for Pete. Then Pete pulled out his present, a crayon drawing of a man, a woman and a child with their arms around each other laughing. Under the picture was just one word: "US." Years later Marjorie writes that it was the richest, most satisfying Christmas they ever had. (4)

Pete's card summed it up. "Us." The love and security of a family. It's the kind of picture God presents to us on Christmas Day. Read God's Christmas card: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Christmas is an act of God, not of humanity. God acted in the only way that God could have acted without taking away our freedom. God became a tiny baby. And God told us who we are: God's own children. We don't need to fear anything. We belong to God.

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1. Best Sermons 3, Harper & Row, 1990, pp. 49-50. Cited in a sermon by Dr. Mickey Anders, First Christian Church, Pikeville, KY.

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2. Pastor Dan Mangler's Sunday Sermon, [http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday\\_sermons/march\\_13\\_2005\\_sermon.html](http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday_sermons/march_13_2005_sermon.html).

3. [http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/news/alert\\_123.shtml](http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/news/alert_123.shtml) Posted on Trinity News 3.

4. Mike Turner, [jmtturner58@bellsouth.net](mailto:jmtturner58@bellsouth.net), The Rock Baptist

