

Christmas: A Day in the Life of God

Jn. 1:1-18

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(Sermon Notes/Transcript)

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For most of us, Christmas memories are a vivid part of our life stories. Growing up, we quickly learned to anticipate the Christmas season as the best time of the year. Christmas was a season filled with vivid sights and sounds – the red and green of the Christmas tree and its ornaments, the beautiful carols and hymns that filled the air, the warmth of family gatherings around the fireplace, big meals and parties with friends and family. But the best part of all, of course, was Christmas Day itself – the presents, the fellowship, the joy. For many of us, those Christmas mornings are among the most impressionable times of our lives.

Now, many of us enjoy watching our children make their own memories on Christmas morning. We know that their life stories are being shaped by the traditions we teach them, the songs we sing with them, and the presents we give (or in some cases, don't give) to them.

But Christmas is not just a day in my life or your life. *The first Christmas was a momentous day in the life of God himself.* Christmas marked a turning point in God's own story, as the eternal Son of God, the Logos of the Father, became flesh.

This is something we cannot comprehend. God becoming man. The Word becoming flesh. How can it be?

Actually, if we look at the biblical story leading up to the incarnation, we might be better off asking, "How could it NOT be?" Everything in the Old Testament points to the incarnation of the Son of God in history. Never does the OT present God as distant, or aloof, or far off from his people. Yes, he is transcendent, exalted far above his creation. But he is also always involved in his creation. He rejoices with his people when they rejoice, he weeps with them when they suffer, and he appears to them in all sorts of forms – the burning bush, the angel of the Lord, the pillar of fire and the cloud, the shekinah glory above the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, and so forth. All these pointed ahead to the event we now celebrate in Christmas. The incarnation of the Son of God is not so much the surprise ending to the story of the Old Testament as it is the next logical step in the progress of God's plan for the creation. The incarnation is a wondrous event -- and yet in hindsight, we can say *it had to be this way.*

But what does it mean for God to become flesh? Four things need to be understood here, and John 1 points us to all of them.

1. The Word ("Logos" in Greek) became flesh.

We need to get a handle on what the incarnation actually involved.

What is the Logos? To Jews, the Logos was God's Wisdom. Some identified his wisdom with the internal structure of creation. The creation itself was a manifestation of God's

wisdom. Psalm 33:6 says “By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made.” In the Greek translation of the OT, “Word” is “Logos.” So the Logos was considered the agent of the creation.

Others identified the Logos with the Torah. The Mosaic Law after all, is praised as a revelation of God’s wisdom throughout the OT. It was both the Word and wisdom of God rolled into one. Possession and practice of this Law is what made Israel superior to the nations.

But “Logos” was not only a Jewish concept. Ancient Greek philosophy was on a constant quest for the Logos of the universe – for the hidden inner key that would unlock the mysteries of the world. Some identified it with human rationality, with logic. Others made it into an abstract principle of truth or goodness. By getting in touch with the Logos through reason or mystical experience, one could discover the true meaning of life.

But John’s language here explodes both Jewish and Pagan understandings of the Logos. The Logos is not just the Law of God, *it is God himself*. The Logos is not an abstraction or a principle, *it is a person*.

Look closely at John’s opening lines.

“In the beginning was the Logos” – the Logos cannot be found *within* the creation because the Logos *precedes* creation. Before Genesis 1:1, the Logos already existed.

“The Logos was *with* God” – in some way the Logos can be distinguished from God the Father -- and yet the Logos is one with God the Father, as John goes on to say: “The Logos *was* God.”

But while this Logos exists from eternity outside the universe, he has now entered into the universe. The Logos has taken to himself a human nature, and is now two natures in one person, both divine and human with out any mixture or separation.

That’s the point of verse 14: “The Word became flesh.”

That is to say, the Logos – this one who is both identified with God and yet distinct from him, who elsewhere in John’s Gospel is called the Son of God – became human. He became one of us. The Creator became a creature. The Son of God became the Son of Mary. The playwright wrote himself into the script and took on the leading, heroic role in the story.

No pagan idol could have done this – not Plato’s demiurge, or Aristotle’s unmoved mover, or the distant god of the Deists, or totally transcendent god of Islam. No other God would put skin on and enter the stream of human history. What John says here is utterly unique and breathtaking. Despite man’s best attempts to keep God at bay, to lock him out of the universe and throw away the key, in Jesus God has entered as fully as possible into the life and history of humanity.

But there’s more.

2. For God to become man was not a contradiction in terms.

As I've already suggested, when the Logos became flesh, he was not acting out of character. Yes, the Logos is fully God, one with him in every way. Yes, he existed from all eternity in bliss and glory. But (as been so often preached from this pulpit) the Father and his Son the Logos related to one another in a humble, sacrificial way.

We know that because in this Gospel, Jesus acts with humility. He constantly points away from himself to his Father. He says my Father is greater than I am. He says he came to do the will of the Father. He says he can do nothing of his own. He says he desires nothing more than to glorify his Father. He says he learned everything from his Father. And he says all these things reveal what God is really like. God didn't begin to act with humility when he became flesh; he's always been humble.

But the Father is also humble. The Son glorifies the Father, but the Father in turn glorifies the Logos. It's not as though the Father sucks up the glory the Son offers like a vacuum, never to be seen again. No, that glory the Son lavishes on the Father the Father returns back to the Son. In John 17, Jesus says to the Father, "Glorify your Son." And the Father does so. He exalts the Son above every name that can be named, he gives him all the glory and honor he can.

So the Father and Son pass glory back and forth to one another. Neither ever acts for his own glory. Rather each acts *for the other*, laying himself out and putting himself at the other's disposal.

What does all this mean? Jesus said, "If you've seen me you've seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). In other words, when we look at Jesus in the gospels – when we see how he tenderly cares for people, how he weeps at suffering, how he courageously faces down death for his friends, how he humbly serves others, how he loves sacrificially, how he exudes hatred for all that is sinful, how he refuses to clutch to his own prerogatives and privileges, how he debases himself in order to exalt his Father – we see what God is like *from the inside*. You want to know what God is like? Look long and hard at Jesus. *Who God is* and *who Jesus is* fit one another like a hand in a glove. The incarnation turns the life of God inside out for all to see.

This is very important. It's all too easy for us to start with our ideas of what the deity must be like – and then try to fit Jesus into that picture. But John does things the other way around. He points us to Jesus, and says, "That's what God is really like. This is who God is. This is what his inner life is like." John gives us a Jesus-shaped view of the deity. That's the meaning of verse 18: "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son [the Logos] who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him."

In that sentence, the word "declare" is translated from the Greek word from which we get the English term "exegete." To "exegete" a passage of Scripture is to draw out its inner meaning, to show how it works, to show its structure and significance. John says the Son is the exegesis of the Father. Jesus, as God in the flesh, shows us what the Father is really like. He shows us the inner life of the Father.

John says he was in the bosom of the Father. You know what's in your bosom? Your heart! By giving us Jesus, the Father was giving us his own heart. Jesus reveals the heart of God himself. Jesus is the revelation and manifestation of the Father's love. He unfolds for us the truth that *the deepest reality in the universe is self-giving, sacrificial love.*

This means there's no hidden God behind Jesus who might have a very different character. For example, we should never think of the Father as stern and harsh in opposition to the loving and compassionate Son. No, whatever qualities and characteristics we find in Jesus are found in God. He is a real and true and accurate revelation of God. The picture Jesus gives us of God is the only one there is. In the face of Jesus, we behold the glory of the Father (1:14). And that glory is self-giving love!

That's what I mean when I say that Christmas was a day in the life of God. God himself – the Logos, the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity – was conceived in human flesh in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit. After nine months of growth, God-in-the-flesh passed through the birth canal and was cradled in his mother's arms as a tiny baby. He grew as boy in wisdom and stature. He learned obedience from sharing in human hardship and suffering. All these events are events not just events in the life of *the man* Jesus, but in the life of *the God-man*. *God himself* experiences these things *in human flesh*. God the Son wept when Lazarus died. God the Son got hungry and thirsty and tired and he traveled around ancient Palestine. God the Son drank wine and partied with his friends. And most mysteriously of all, God the Son died in the flesh on the cross. That's what we mean when we say the Word became flesh. That's what we're celebrating in Christmas: That God has become man and lived and died for us and was raised again for us on the third day. God has done these things in and through the man Jesus – two natures in one person forever.

3. When God becomes flesh, a new creation is inaugurated.

John 1 is brimming with new creation language and imagery. In fact, you can think of John 1 as a Christological rewriting of Genesis 1. Whereas Moses gave an account of the first creation, John is giving an account of the *new creation*, the recreation. The coming of God in the flesh means the dawning of a new world.

John's opening words – “In the beginning” – immediately take every Bible reader back to Genesis 1. From there, other themes and images from Gen. 1 keep popping up. In Gen. 1, God creates through his spoken word. John says the same thing here – “all things were made through the Logos.” John speaks of the light shining into the darkness just as in Gen. 1. John mentions life, just as Gen. 1 speaks of the living creatures. And just as the grand culmination of Gen. 1 is the creation of man in God's image, so the culmination of Jn. 1 is the creation of a man who is the exact image of God – indeed, a man who is God in the flesh. Jesus is the new and final Adam, and the ultimate image bearer.

Col. 1:15 calls him the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” Heb. 1:3 calls him the brightness of the Father's glory and the exact replication of his image. The Logos is eternally in the image of God; now he adds to himself a *created nature* made in God's image.

All this suggests that in the incarnation of the Logos in the man Jesus, the world has been given a new beginning, a fresh start, a clean slate.

John goes on in 1:12-13 to say that we become sharers in this new creation. We are born again of God and enter into his family and into the new world he has created. We live in God's new world – a world under the reign of the Jesus Christ. He has fulfilled the prophetic hopes and promises for a new creation.

But John can focus this new creation theme even more sharply, and that brings us to our fourth point.

4. When God becomes flesh, a new Israel is established.

Look again at verse 14: “The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us.” This is one of those places where the translators have done us a big disservice. The word for “dwelt” is literally “tabernacled.” It’s the same word used for the tent that God told Moses to build for him as a house, so he could live among his people as they journeyed through the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

Jesus is the new tabernacle. Now, in one sense, this just reinforces our previous point. The tabernacle was a model of the cosmos. It was a miniature replica of the universe. So to say that he is the new and true tabernacle is to say that a new creation has begun in him.

But we can go further. The building of the tabernacle right after the exodus really solidified Israel's existence as a nation. The whole purpose of God redeeming Israel out of Egypt was for this reason: that they might build a house for his name and worship him there. The erection of the tabernacle signaled the formal inauguration of Israel's existence as God's special nation.

But if Jesus is the new tabernacle, it can only mean one thing. A new Israel is being formed around him. He is the center of a new covenant community. Just as Jews gathered around the tabernacle to draw near to God and worship him, so the new Israel draws near to the Father through the flesh of Jesus. He is our tabernacle.

The entire gospel of John is really about the formation of this new covenant community. Israel proves herself to be darkness – she seizes at the One who is Light but cannot she overcome him in the end. God has come to Israel in Jesus to make his home with her, but she rejects him and casts him out and has him crucified. But in the end, Jesus conquers the darkness in his resurrection.

As you move through the Gospel of John, you find this new tabernacle is picking up worshippers as he goes -- a few here and a few there. He is creating a new Israel. He calls a handful of disciples to himself – 12 actually, just as there were 12 tribes in the old Israel. He calls the Samaritan woman and she becomes one of his worshippers. The man born blind in Jn.9 is willing to risk excommunication from the old Israel in order to follow this man who embodies the new Israel in himself. He leaves the old Israel behind in order to enter the new. Jesus heals a lame man in Jn. 5 right outside the temple in Jerusalem. Lame animals

could not be offered to God on the altar, but Jesus restores this man so he can become a true worshipper, a living sacrifice. He joins the new Israel as well.

John tells his story about Jesus in symbols to show what he's doing, to show this transition in Israel's history that Jesus is bringing about. His stories about Jesus take images and themes from the Old Covenant and show how Jesus transforms them into something better.

Jesus turns the water into wine in chapter 2. The water symbolizes the old covenant. There are 6 (note that #! It's the # of the Old Covenant) clay pots. But he turns it into something better, the best of wines. The transformation of water into wine reveals and points to the transformation of the old covenant into the new.

In John 4, he offers living water, water that is better than that which comes from Jacob's well. He identifies himself as the greater than Jacob.

In chapter 13, he gives a new and better commandment than Moses gave. He's the greater Moses.

He cleanses the temple to pre-enact its judgment, to show that it's obsolete. And he claims his body is the true temple that will be raised up on the third day after it's destroyed. He is the Greater Temple.

And on and on we could go, right through the entire book.

John does his covenant theology in symbols. In his gospel, he shows us how Jesus has brought every facet of Israel's history to its climax and fulfillment.

But he not only fulfills Israel's prophetic hope; on the other side of his death and resurrection, he creates a new Israel, not identified by having Jewish blood in your veins or the Jewish sign of circumcision, but a family created by a new birth of water and the Spirit and marked out by a life of love in accord with Jesus' own example.

Now what does all this mean? God has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. *That first Christmas morning was an event in the life of God.* It was the birth of God as a man, the beginning of his life as incarnate Son. But it was not only the beginning of a new life for God; it signaled the advent of a new beginning for the world and for Israel. It marked the dawn of God's incarnational ministry to the world and to his people. God had been close to his people before, identifying with them in their suffering and pain as well as in their joys and triumphs, but now he would draw as close as possible. And in doing so he would make all things new.

The good news is that we have been swept up into this incarnational work of God. We have been caught up into his incarnational service to the world. Just as God lives incarnationally, so we are to live and minister incarnationally as well. That's really what Paul means when he calls the church the body of Christ, or the temple of God. The church is an extension of God's own outreach of love to the world in Jesus. We have been made partakers in this kind of ministry.

That's what Christmas is all about: the sending of Christ into the world. "Mass" comes from the Latin word for "sent." Christ-mass means the sending forth of the Christ.

But the church has been sent forth as well. It's Church-mass as well. Jn 17:18: "As You sent me into the world, I have also sent them into the world." What does that mean?

Just as God-in-Jesus entered a world of darkness and hatred, we are to enter worlds of darkness in order to bring the light of God's presence and love.

We should speak and live the gospel before those who do not know Jesus in our neighborhoods and our workplaces so that their darkness will be overcome and they will be drawn into the light of the new creation.

But we're not only to enter worlds of darkness in order to reclaim them for the light, we're called to actually create new worlds, create new situations, that in a small but important ways serve as analogues or replications of what Christ accomplished in his incarnation.

The coming of God-in-Jesus formed a new community. We're to form new worlds of community as well. Things like: starting a friendship where there wasn't one before. To befriend someone new – maybe even someone who's been attending church with you for a long time, or someone who's been your next door neighbor or co-worker for years – is to create a new world in a tiny way. It's a small but significant signpost that Jesus started the new world in a big way and now we as his disciples are continuing that work. God-in-Jesus has befriended us by becoming one of us and by laying down his life for us. We're to do the same for others.

God-in-Jesus formed a new community through the incarnation. And we are to be forming new communities as well, by loving people, taking risks to befriend people who might even reject us, by making sacrifices for others, by getting out of our own little worlds that we're so comfortable in and reaching out to new people.

We form a new world in a miniature way when we forgive those who have wronged us. When you forgive someone, you are wiping the slate clean, you are making a fresh start, you're establishing a tiny picture of the new creation. In a small way you are re-enacting what Jesus accomplished through his incarnation.

Or look at it another way.

Jesus became a tabernacle for his people, as verse 14 says; he dwelt among his people, and in fact became a kind of home for them. In Jn. 15, he builds on the tabernacle and temple imagery of the first couple chapters and says his disciples must *abide in him*, they must take up residence and live in him. He becomes their dwelling place. In the New Covenant, we get to dwell within the temple himself. But that's also a model for us, a model for our way of life, for our ministry. We're to allow *others* to abide in us. We're to be a sort of safe haven for others, a resting place for them. By opening our homes, and our hearts, and our lives, we become a tabernacle for others.

But we also have to enter *others'* lives and tabernacle *among* them. It goes both ways: we invite others into our lives, but we also *go* to others and find ways to enter *their* lives. Incarnational living means *both*. We have to make our “home” among others, reaching out to them. We're to be the extension of the incarnation to them, to manifest Christ's body (that is, God-in-the-flesh) to them. We have to show others the love that God-in-Christ has shown us.

See, Christmas is a not a one-day-a-year kind of thing. It's not even a season-of-the-year kind of thing. *It's a way of life for God's people.* It's a way of living and ministering incarnationally as the glory of the Father shines in and through us.

Let us beg God for the grace to do so.