

God WITH Us

Matthew 1:23

December 25, 2016



In the TV special, “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” we hear Linus read Luke 2:8-14. He ends by saying, “That’s what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown.” Charles M. Schulz did a great job back in 1965. Many of us weren’t even born yet, but we’ve come to appreciate Linus reciting the Christmas Story and keeping us on track with the true meaning of Christmas. Matthew 1:23 teaches us that, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God WITH us”).”

¹Today I’d like to tell you a story. It’s a story about a man – a mostly good man, who was kind and thoughtful. He wasn’t a Scrooge or a Grinch – he was decent, generous, and upright in his dealings with other people. But, this man simply didn’t buy the “Christmas story.” He’d heard it so many times – the story about the God of the universe, supposedly humbling Himself to be born as a baby, in a manger in Bethlehem. To him, this purported historical event lined up right next to the toy Nutcracker coming to life in that famous ballet. To his adult sensibilities, it seemed like just a silly story. Despite his wife’s sincere faith and devotion to God, he remained a skeptic; unconvinced and unmoved.

He got to thinking though: “Whose idea was Christmas anyways?” “Who came up with this ludicrous idea that an utterly transcendent God would reduce Himself to mundane humanity? ...And why? Why would the divine essence of the one true God embody Himself in the fragile state of a human infant?” Please...give me a break! It made no sense!

He remembered back to his Sunday School teacher as a kid. Mrs. Crosby was so kind and patient. She was the first one who taught him about Jesus having the name “Immanuel,” and that it meant “God with us.” The idea of the incarnation was just fine for him as a kid. But now, as an adult, it was clearly a crazy concept. It didn’t make any sense to his rational mind. He was just not willing to abandon his intellectual honesty.

He could not pretend that he believed what he had learned as a child.

And so, each Christmas Eve, when his wife would once again ask him to come to church with her, he flat out told her “no thank you.” “Honey, I know it makes you sad but I’m not coming to church with you and the kids for the Christmas Eve service. I’d feel like a hypocrite. I’d much rather just stay at home but I’ll wait up for you guys.” So he stayed at home alone while his family went to the Christmas Eve service at the church just a little ways down the street.

He watched out the window as his family drove away in the minivan. Snow was just beginning to fall in big flakes and the scene was something right out of a postcard – a real Hallmark moment. He watched for a few more minutes as the snow turned heavier and the

¹ Adapted from the story, “The Man and the Birds,” by Paul Harvey

wind began to gust – a storm was coming in. He went back to his chair by the warm, crackling fire and began to read an old Louis L'Amour novel. And then, all of a sudden... wham! – a loud thud against his window. And then, two more, wham - wham. He thought to himself, “probably just some of the neighborhood kids throwing snowballs.” But, when he went to his front door to check it out, he found instead... a flock of birds, huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm. Driven by the wind and their own fear they were flying themselves right into the picture window, trying to gain shelter from the storm. He'd always loved all the various species of beautiful little songbirds that would come and sit at his feeders.



Well, he couldn't just let the poor creatures lie there and freeze to death so he grabbed his coat and slipped on his boots and ran through the snow and cold to his barn. It would provide a warm shelter if he could just get the birds to go in. So he threw the doors open wide and turned on a light but... the birds did not come in; they would not come in. He thought that perhaps food might entice them in so he ran back into the house and got a loaf of bread. Carefully he walked his way backwards from the birds toward the big open doors of the barn, crumbling piece after piece of the bread, making a trail to the safe, warm barn. But, to his disappointment, the birds ignored the breadcrumbs and continued to flap around helplessly.

He tried circling around them in an effort to herd them toward the barn but they kept turning in every direction... except, of course, in the direction of the barn. He tried to catch them with his gloved hands so he could gently carry them to the barn one by one but they scattered in all directions. And then, he tried something desperate, even silly. He looked around to make sure that no one was watching and then he began to flap his arms, like a bird. He thought maybe that would make them think he was just a big bird trying to help them. Well, obviously that didn't work either!

Eventually he realized... they were just too afraid of him. He thought to himself, “To them, I am a HUGE and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me. I'm not trying to hurt them; I'm trying to help them. But how can I convince them? I'm 100 times their size, I don't speak their language, and they have no reason to trust me. They'll never be able to understand what I'm trying to do for them. They can't be enticed or lead or herded. I'm not sure what else that I can do...”

“If only I could be a bird and be WITH them. Not just pretend to be LIKE them but to actually be among them AS a fellow bird. Then I could speak to them in their own language. Then, they might trust me and understand that I'm just trying to help. I could tell them not to be afraid. I could show them the way to safety and life. I could lead them to the shelter of the warm barn. If only I were one of them. But I would have to become one of them in order to genuinely be WITH them. I would have to become a bird, so they could see and hear and understand my message. Boy, it sure sounds silly... it sounds crazy... but it would work!” That's exactly what I would need to do...

At that moment the sound of church bells broke through the noise of the storm. The sound of Christmas carols reached the man's ears. He listened to the bells ringing in the glad tidings of Christmas – Christ is born, Peace on earth and good will to men. Then the man sank to his

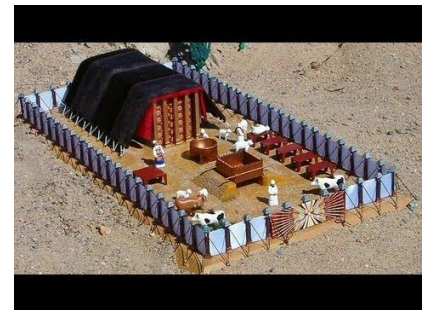
knees in the snow and he prayed to the God who had loved him enough to become a human being in order that he might understand the way to safety and life.

The point of this modern parable is very simple. “Whose idea was Christmas anyway?” Well, it was God’s idea. God, in His mercy and kindness, doesn’t want to frighten us but rather to invite us to safety. Matthew 1:23 makes a lot of sense in this context, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God WITH us”).” Jesus had to become one of us so that we could see and hear and understand His message – the Good News. We can find shelter in Him. We can have a meaningful and abundant life, if only we will trust Him, turn to Him, and follow Him.

It becomes fairly clear why the divine essence of the one true God chose to embody Himself in the fragile state of a human infant. This ludicrous idea that an utterly transcendent God would reduce Himself to mundane humanity is precisely what the Bible teaches us. Colossians 2:9 tells us, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Transcendence and immanence are not mutually exclusive. They may seem like an oxymoron but in Jesus this reality is explained and illustrated so vividly for us.

John 1:14 tells us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” This phrase “made his dwelling” can be translated “set up his tent.” Jesus set up His tent on planet earth so that we could get to know Him. He made this earth his temporary residence. The Message² translation says it this way: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” The imagery of Jesus setting up His tent causes us to glance back at the OT Tabernacle. The tabernacle was a tent about the size of our Sanctuary platform 15’ wide x 45’ long and 15’ high. It was surrounded by a courtyard area not too much different than the size of our church sanctuary 75’ x 150’.³ OT Israel would set up this Tabernacle as they traveled through the desert wilderness. The 12 tribes would set up their camp all around it.

There are over 125 times in the OT where the Tabernacle is called the “tent of meeting.”⁴ It was a place for communication with God and revelation from Him.⁵ The OT Tabernacle was a significant visual demonstration of God dwelling among His people, i.e. “God WITH us.” The Tent of Meeting was also a foreshadowing of Jesus, the Messiah who would come and dwell among us.



We learn even more about WHY Jesus dwelt among us in Romans 5:19. It sets up a contrast between the man Adam and the man Jesus: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [Jesus] the many will be made righteous.”

“It had to happen this way. Only in the complete identification with our flesh could Christ be the second Adam, the perfect man that Adam was not. Adam sinned and died as a man; only as a man could Jesus do what Adam failed to do and be the mediator between God and man.

² By Eugene H. Peterson

³ See NIV Study Bible, 2011, note on p. 136

⁴ See Exodus 33:7, מוֹעֵד אֶהְיֶה

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, Gen. Ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5 Q-Z, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, pp. 572-573.

Why? Because only flesh can die.”⁶ Hebrews 2:14 & 17 explain it this way, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil... 17 For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human 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.”

God the Father wanted to send us a clear message of His love on that very first Christmas. Therefore, He sent Jesus into humanity to be Immanuel who is “God WITH us.” May we now have the power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God expressed through Jesus Christ. Amen. And Merry Christmas!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on December 25, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

⁶ Joseph “Skip” Ryan excerpt on p. 18 of *Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus* edited by Nancy Guthrie. Used with permission from *That You May Believe: New Life in the Son* by Joseph R. Ryan, Crossway Books, 2003.