

Christmas Eve Meditation

John 1:1-5, 14-18

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It was a cold December afternoon. Rain mixed with snow splashed against the windshield. All day long two men, a pastor named Jerry and a layman named Jim, had been delivering Christmas boxes. Many of the families who would receive these boxes would get nothing else for Christmas that year. The pickup truck had been loaded when the two men started out on their journey but now, only one box remained. It was covered with an old piece of tarp to protect it against the rain.

The address on the card meant a drive well beyond the city limit. They were tempted just to give the box to someone close by and call it a day. But Jim helped them both get beyond that temptation. "Well, let's give it a try. If we can't find the place, we can always come back and give the box to someone else."

The rain was pouring down by the time they reached the address on the card. The old white framed house stood on a hillside overlooking the valley. It had once been an elegant place, the centerpiece of a large farm. Now, the farm was gone and the house had deteriorated over the years.

The two men slipped and slid, huffed and puffed as they carried the box up the hill. The red clay offered no foothold and the box, wet from the rain, was beginning to come apart. They climbed the high steps to the porch, set the box down and slid it across the floor. They straightened up just in time to glimpse the face of a small boy at the window. He had been watching them come up the hill. Now, he announced their arrival with shouts of excitement, "They're here, Grandma, they're here!"

The door opened and an older woman greeted them. Her gray hair was pulled back in a bun at the back of her neck. She had on a dark, plain dress with a white apron. She was drying her hands with a dishtowel and explained to them that she had been doing the supper dishes.

"I told you, they would come," said the boy from behind her. He rushed to the box and began pulling at the goodies inside.

The woman told them that she and her grandson were all that was left of her family. The father and mother had divorced and gone their separate ways. The little boy had been left behind for Grandma to raise. She said, "Oh, I am so glad you are here. He was up early this morning looking for you. He sat by that window all day. I wasn't sure you would come and I tried to prepare him in case of a disappointment. But he just said, 'Don't worry, Grandma, I know they will come.'"

I don't think the little boy realized it, but the kind of hope he showed while waiting that day is the kind of hope that the people of God find fulfilled on this occasion when we gather to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. For you see, hundreds of years before the events that unfolded in Bethlehem, the prophet had uttered the words that expressed the hope of the people: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

It is the hope that unto us a Savior will come.

And finally, on Christmas, we can say, "I knew he would come..."

That, really, is the essence of Christmas: In Jesus Christ, God came to us. Most people, when they consider the meaning of Christmas, do not even think in terms of the Incarnation. We are more prone to think in the comforting images of the nativity scene in quiet little Bethlehem, with the angels coming to the shepherds and sharing with them the good news of great joy. But rarely do we consider Christmas in terms of John's description: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only-begotten, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.¹

Let's be honest, it's hard to deck the halls and decorate our Christmas trees from the language of John's gospel.

It may not sound like Christmas to us, but the very essence of the good news of great joy to which the angels referred *is* the Incarnation. That God would come to us, not merely *looking* like a human being, but *as* a human being, is precisely the good news that we proclaim at Christmas. That the Lord would come to redeem the world that can't redeem itself is the hope that fills our hearts. Tonight, we can say, We knew he would come.

The Incarnation is good news in at least three ways for us: In the Incarnation, God shows us what he is like; in the Incarnation, God shows us that he understands our condition; and in the Incarnation, God proves to us his love.

By coming to us and dwelling among us in the person of Jesus Christ, God shows us what he is like. Truly, there is no way that our human mind can grasp the infinite God. There is an enormous chasm between us and God. And the truth is, we are unable to cross over that chasm and discover on our own who God is.

So God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and revealed himself to us in terms that we can understand. God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ, communicating himself to us in a way that humans can understand. "God took on visibility; God took on human flesh; God translated himself...into the categories that are accessible to our human ways of knowing. And this means that we have a chance to glimpse deeper into the mystery of God, not because of our powers, but because of the gift of revelation that comes at Christmas."²

In the Incarnation, God shows us what he is like.

And in the Incarnation, God shows us that he understands our condition. Don't you see--by becoming human in Jesus Christ, God has walked in our footsteps. He has faced temptation. He has known the joy of friendship and the pain of rejection. He has suffered hunger, and he has eaten his fill. He chose not only to become a human being; God also chose to share our condition with us.

Other world religions tell us about a God who is remote, out there, unreachable. Other world religions tell us about a God who barks commands from afar: straighten up your lives, get yourself out of your own quagmire, clean up your act! But in Christ there is no sense of remoteness. In Christ God ceases to be above and outside and beyond us. God understands what it is like to be human because in Jesus Christ God became human.

God's been there. God's done that. And so God knows what we need and how to give it to us. In the Incarnation, God has shown us that he understands our condition.

And in the Incarnation, God proves to us his love. It is his coming to us in Jesus Christ, his living among us as one of us, and his dying for us on the cross that is the ultimate demonstration of God's love for us. It's because God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ that we don't just hear about God's love for us, but we can

also experience God's love for us. Because of the Incarnation, God's love has moved ethereal words that we really had no way of understanding, to concrete action in flesh and bones.

She was eighteen and he was nineteen when they met. They fell in love, and a year later they were married. Some six years and three children later, she was standing at her sink filled with dirty dishes, thinking of the piles of laundry that still awaited her, and the pail of dirty diapers in the baby's room.

And something within her snapped. She took off her apron, picked up her purse, and she walked out of the house.

Days went by, and then weeks. Sometimes she would call home to check on the children. And when she did, her husband would tell her how much he loved her, and he would beg her to come home. Each time, she refused.

The young husband hired a private detective to find his wife. The detective came back with a report that his wife was living in a cut-rate motel in Des Moines, Iowa. The husband packed his bags, dropped off his children with a neighbor, and got in the car for the long drive to Des Moines. He found the motel and made his way to her room. When he knocked on the door, his hand trembled, because he didn't know what he would find when the door opened.

His wife opened the door, stood for a moment with a look of shock on her face, then she fell apart in his arms.

Later, at home, when the children were in bed, he asked her a question that had long troubled him: "Why wouldn't you tell me where you were when you called? You knew I loved you. Why didn't you come home?"

"Because," she replied, "your love was just words. Now I know how much you love me, because you came for me."³

God came! That is the glorious message of Christmas! In the Incarnation, God proves his love to us! No longer is his love just words; in Christ his love has become real for us.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten, full of grace and truth.

Do you ever wonder what Christmas is all about?

When somebody asks you to explain the meaning of Christmas, what do you tell them?

¹ John 1:1, 14

² John Claypool, "God Became What We Are," sermon preached December 25, 1994, www.30goodminutes.org