

Sermon
January 4, 2015

Jeremiah 31:7-14 or Sirach 24:1-12

7 This is what the LORD says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.' **8** See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return. **9** They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son. **10** "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.' **11** For the LORD will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. **12** They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD-- the grain, the new wine and the oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. **13** Then maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. **14** I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the LORD.

Psalms 147:12-20 or Wisdom 10:15-21

12 Extol the LORD, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion, **13** for he strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you. **14** He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat. **15** He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. **16** He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frostlike ashes. **17** He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast? **18** He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow. **19** He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. **20** He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD.

Ephesians 1:3-14

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. **4** For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love **5** he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace **8** that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. **9** And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to

his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, **10** to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. **11** In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, **12** in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. **13** And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.

John 1:[1-9] 10-18

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. **6** There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12** But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13** who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. **14** And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. **15** (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") **16** From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. **17** The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!!! Yes, it is still
Christmas, two Sundays after December 25th.
Christmas is a season, not just a day, and a season
meant to commemorate the depth of Christ's birth,
of God's incarnation in Jesus.

Incarnation is not a word common to most of our
daily vocabularies. It sounds kind of like a flower or
maybe an instant breakfast drink. But the word
incarnation has nothing to do with plant life or high
calorie shakes. The incarnation actually describes the
unique historical event of God becoming human. The

root word in Latin, *carnēs*, means flesh. If it helps, think of that carne asada you got the last time you went out for Mexican with friends. To incarnate means to take on flesh, to become bodily.

We hear this every Christmas, that God became human, that the Creator inhabited a creaturely estate. We look to the manger in Bethlehem and give thanks for Jesus the Christ, Mary's baby who is also the God of the universe. But, within our culture, people are beginning to ask a simple question: so what? What's the big deal about this incarnation?

Stories of somebody becoming something or someone else are fairly popular. Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper tells the story of these two men, a royal and a beggar, switching places,

becoming someone they're not in order to experience life from the other side, so to speak. For film enthusiast's, Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* tells a similar story from the perspective of an African prince who leaves a life of luxury to work in a Queens, NY based fast food restaurant in order to discover what life is like without wealth. But these aren't necessary direct correlations with the incarnation.

First, each of these stories tells of people who pretend to become someone else in order for some sort of personal gain, whether a personal relationship or for financial advancement or for pure curiosity. God, however, becomes human for our sake, in order to bring salvation to us. The incarnation is a selfless act. More to the point of today's Gospel

passage, each of these stories is about pretending to be other people, while the incarnation is about God becoming human. In Bethlehem we don't find a God in a mask, play-acting as though this human body is a Halloween costume. We don't find God in a temporary state, psyching out the human race in people clothes. The incarnation is about God, for the first time since Eden, coming face to face with humanity.

Of course, God appeared to many people across time and space before the incarnation. Moses found the burning bush. The pillar of smoke and fire led the Israelites through the wilderness. Elijah found God in the sound of sheer silence. Jacob wrestled with God at Peniel. What's the big difference

between those instances and Jesus?

Well, God is not a burning bush, but appeared to Moses this way in order to protect Moses from the power of God's presence. God is not a pillar of smoke or fire, but used these forms to lead the Israelites in a way they could understand. God is not the sound of sheer silence, but appeared this way in order to get Elijah's attention. Nor is God a professional wrestler, but instead grappled with Jacob in order help Jacob confront his own fears before becoming the kind of leader God intended for God's people, before finding his true identity as Israel.

You see, back when Moses met with God in the burning bush, God told him something that guided

God's relationship with humanity for hundreds and thousands of years: "You cannot see my face and live." After Eden, the purity of relationship between creatures and Creator was lost. We couldn't behold the fullness of God, couldn't see God face to face, because we'd be confronted with the fullness of our own sinfulness. We'd be doomed by our own failures. This is why God appears in such strange ways, as a sort of compassionate illusion, to save us from ourselves.

But in Jesus, we find an entirely different experience. Jesus isn't God in some sort of divine costume contest. In today's Gospel, John writes that while, "no one has ever seen God, it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made

God known." John here points to the entirely unique reality that is Jesus. Jesus, the human person, is also the fullness of God. For the first time since Adam and Eve sinned their way out of Eden, God's face is now known to humanity. No longer do we need the mediation of a burning bush or a pillar of smoke, for the fire of God is borne of Mary's womb. No longer do we need the sheer silence of Elijah, for the word has become flesh and speaks to us. Rather than a mysterious encounter with a wrestler, we now come face to face with a savior, our savior, who is Jesus Christ.

Phillip Cary, an author and professor at Eastern University, writes beautifully about the incarnation. In his words, " The place to find real people is not in our

hearts but in their own flesh: surely that is why God came to us in the flesh, in his own Son, Jesus our Lord, who is God from God, the eternally begotten of the Father. ...Our Lord's face is a human face, and his voice is a human voice. That's why it's okay that our voices, too, are human voices. For he speaks to us in human voices, the voices of prophets and apostles, preachers and teachers, in song and prayer--and in his own voice, which is a human voice, the voice of his human flesh, born of a woman."

Cary gets to the heart of the matter, the heart of God, which is Jesus. The miracle of this season is that there is no longer anything separating us from God. Rather than speaking through the voice of prophets, God now speaks with a personal voice. The

incarnation means that the God, once far off, now is near to us in Jesus. Near not only in space, not only in time, but near in identity, in human condition. The incarnation is about God's choice to become one of us, God's will to bring divinity into the human condition. The incarnation says something very specific to humanity, and indeed, to all creation: "I want to be with you."

More than pretending, more than play acting, God wants so deeply to restore creation to goodness that God becomes a creation! God chooses this life, full of pain and pleasure, of struggle and success. This life, once barred from Eden, is now full of Eden's perfection.

God's decision to become human tells us something humanity. All humanity is deserving of the dignity owed to Christ in this Christmas season. From the most famous to the most obscure, whether wealthy or in need, whether full or hungry, joyful or distressed, God chose a body like all of our bodies. God chose our common human estate. Any time we disdain, oppress, or violate the humanity of others, we abuse the humanity of Jesus.

This is true only because Jesus chose to make humanity holy, only because Jesus chose to the imbue our nature with God's nature. Despite our sinfulness, Jesus joined us in our condition to make us pure. Despite our limitations, Jesus took on our estate to unite us with God. We will spend the rest of our

lives learning to live this way, learning to embrace this gift of Christ to once again be set right in relationship with God. But as we see in the incarnation, God is willing to take on our flesh and walk this journey with us.

That's the beauty of the Epiphany celebration. As God becomes a human being, all humanity begins to recognize the goodness of God. Magi from far away, Gentiles who've likely never encountered Jewish lands or Jewish peoples, come to worship Jesus, come to pay homage to Israel's messiah. In this toddler, the magi find God and find their own humanity. Epiphany is just that. An epiphany. A revelation that herein lies not just a God vying for our affection, but the God who created us to have

affections. We find not a partisan God, but the God who created us all. We find the fullness of God, united with the fullness of humanity. Even those with whom we least expect to find God. Thanks be to God. Amen.