

Advent 4

December 20, 2020

God's Initiative

Luke 1:26-38

Every year, as we approach Christmas, we hear conflicting declarations of “what Christmas is all about.” People talk about their families getting together for the holiday, with those members who live far away coming home, and then they say, “That’s what Christmas is all about.” There’s a song that insists, “Christmas is for children ...,” implying that children are what Christmas is all about.

One man, only partially in jest, says that cookies are what Christmas is all about. Others see frivolity, parties, shopping, gift-giving or even exhaustion as what Christmas is all about.

Of course, if you are a church person, you might say that what Christmas is really all about is a celebration of the coming of Jesus into the world, and of course, you would be right. Theologians would agree with you, but they might use the word “incarnation.” What it means is, God somehow coming in human form. Or as John, the gospel writer, put it, “The word became flesh.”

Although incarnation is a highfalutin word, the concept is not that difficult to understand. While understanding incarnation itself is not difficult, it takes more thought to grasp its significance. So, let’s look at our O.T. story for today, it can serve as a metaphor for incarnation. In 2 Samuel 7, we find King David, after having consolidated his kingdom and moved into a palace for himself, deciding that he’d like to build an impressive house for God as well. David wasn’t so theologically naïve as to think that God needed a physical dwelling as though he were merely a super human, but he did know that the ark of the covenant, that special box containing the tablets on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments, was a unique symbol of the presence of God among the people. And at that time, the ark was housed in a temporary structure, a tent.

That doesn’t seem right to David. “I am living in a house of cedar, a luxury palace, but

the ark of God stays in a tent.” So, he resolves to build a temple.

But that very night, a prophet of God named Nathan, receives word from God. He is to tell David to not proceed with his plans. God points out that from the very day God led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the ark was housed in a temporary, movable structure, the tabernacle. Did I ever ask any of you to build me a house of cedar? God asks. So, Nathan tells David about this and David cancels the plan. In fact, says God to Nathan, tell David that I will build him a house. By that, God apparently meant the royal line or dynasty of David, which ends up being fulfilled in the New Testament by the coming of Jesus as a descendant of David. An actual temple was built later under David’s son Solomon, but that did not last forever.

David’s impulse to create a special place for God was right, however. God forbade the execution of that impulse in the way that David had envisioned, but he still wanted to dwell with David and his people. Thus, God says **he will make the house** where he will abide, and it will be **one within the people**. That’s incarnation.

The Christmas carol “Joy to the World” picks up the theme: “Let every heart prepare him room,” it says, but in reality, **the Lord** is the one who prepares a room for us.

Christmas reminds us of yet another “room” where God chose to dwell, at least temporarily — the womb of a peasant girl named Mary. As the angel Gabriel told Mary, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son.” And then, of course, God dwelt in that son, Jesus. That’s incarnation, too, the Incarnation.

Lutheran Bishop Stephen Bouman tells of standing behind an altar in a small crypt chapel of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth in the Holy Land, the place where Mary heard that she was going to have a baby. He saw some Latin words carved into the altar, *Verbum caro factum est*, “The Word was made flesh.” But then he noticed that there was one other little word in Latin. That word: h-i-c. Hic. “Here.” *Verbum caro hic factum est*. “The Word was made flesh here.”

Probably whoever authorized that inscription meant it to refer to that specific location, but in reality, the Incarnation means God became flesh here on earth, for all of us. The Incarnation means that we can speak of the nearness of God. Incarnation means that God

walks with us on earth, and that if we are saved anywhere, it is right here on earth.

The Incarnation enables us to sense how near God is. During America's Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln sometimes went to the hospitals to visit wounded soldiers. One soldier who saw Lincoln come into the ward for a visit spoke of it years later, saying: "I had a good home, and I had learned in church that God is compassionate. But I don't think I understood compassion till the day that I saw suffering in Lincoln's face. The boy in the next bed was dying, and the president sat there for two hours with this lad, clutching his hand. The Secretary of War and a couple of generals were trying to move the president along — I think for a cabinet meeting. But Lincoln wouldn't move. He sat there in the stench and in the noise and he talked with that boy about home on the Sangamon River. The president talked with him till he died. And I saw the tiredness in the president's face and the sadness of his eyes and then I knew things about God that I'd never known before."

There's a story about some older men who gathered to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their college graduation. Naturally, all of them had changed in appearance over the years — they were grayer, heavier, balder, more wrinkled and so on. But instead of providing name tags, as some reunions do, the master of ceremonies decided that it would be more fun to have each man stand up in turn and have the others try to identify him using as a guide the picture from their college yearbook, which the men had on the tables in front of them. As they proceeded, they were able to identify all but one man. Nothing in his present appearance gave him away. Finally, the man said, "All right! I see that you do not remember me. Wait just a moment and I will give you a clue." With that, he stepped out of the room and then came back with a good-looking young man by his side. "This," he said, "is my son. Now do you know who I am?" Almost immediately several men called out his name. The appearance of the son, who resembled his father, enabled the other men to identify the father.

So, Jesus helps use to identify the Father in heaven. The Bible is full of the words of God, but the words become so much clearer when we can recognize them in a person. So, the words become flesh — incarnate — in Jesus Christ. And because of that we know how near God is and understand better what God wills for us.

The Incarnation also means that God came in the flesh to show us how to live the life God wants for us. Several years ago, there was a story out of the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin about a rare female whooping crane named Tex who for some reason seemed to have an emotional attachment to male humans but not to male cranes. That was a problem, because Tex wouldn't perform the usual crane mating dance with a male crane, and the birds must dance to become excited enough to produce an egg that will hatch. And having new chicks was important because whooping cranes are endangered.

Over the years, Tex's keepers at the foundation had managed get Tex to lay several eggs by means of artificial insemination, but none of them hatched. So finally, they tried another approach. They used artificial insemination again to impregnate Tex, but this time, the foundation director George Archibald, to whom Tex was strongly attracted, moved into the pen with Tex, and in a way, became a crane — a human “incarnated” as a crane. Several times a day for six weeks, Archibald and Tex did the mating dance together. And eventually Tex produced an egg that hatched, producing a live chick. Archibald taught Tex how to be crane she was meant to be. Jesus, coming to earth, taught us humans how to be the people God wants us to be.

Like David, we want to make a room for him, and we do that by opening in our hearts to him. But as David learned, God would establish the room in him. **God took the initiative.** That's what God did at Christmas. **God took the initiative. And that's what Christmas is all about.**