

December 24, 2016

The Faces of Christmas

The Face of God

John 1:1-14

Opening words: This evening, I continue my sermon series, *The Faces of Christmas*. We are looking at the different faces in the story of Christmas. They were like us in many ways. Their lives were far from perfect. They faced challenges too, the same challenges we face today. In the past 2,000 years, our world has changed a great deal when it comes to transportation, communication and electronics, but the human condition remains the same. On Thanksgiving weekend, we looked at the most famous stepfather in history, Joseph. Then, we looked at a couple with a fertility problem, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Next, we looked at a pregnant teenage girl, Mary. This evening we are looking at the baby who changed the lives of everyone around him, Jesus. Let me say this clearly. He was the incarnation of God.

We are instructed this evening from the Gospel of John. It was written by the disciple whom Jesus loved, John. He wrote it approximately the year 85 AD. He wrote his Gospel to appeal to a Greek-thinking crowd. His goal was to prove to them that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. In our Gospel lesson for this evening, John 1:1-14, are some of the finest words ever written. I have called this message *The Face of God*.

John 1:1-14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ 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.

Augustine once said, "*The incarnation of God is beyond all human understanding.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

I love the story of former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. No one questioned his authority. His subordinates were constantly trying to find a way to impress him. For example, one young FBI agent was put in charge of office supplies. In an effort to cut some costs and impress his boss, he reduced the size of the office memo paper. One of the new memo sheets soon ended up on Hoover's desk. Hoover took one look at it, determined he didn't like the size of the margins on the paper, and quickly scribbled on the memo, "Watch the borders!" The memo was passed throughout the agency. For the next six weeks, it became nearly impossible to enter the United States from Mexico or Canada. Do I have to say it? The FBI was watching the borders. I tell you that story to make one simple point: communicating can be a complex thing.

Have you ever stopped to consider all the ways in which we have to communicate in our time? Like J. Edgar Hoover, you can write a simple note on a scrap piece of paper. You could write a formal letter on a sheet of stationery. You can pick up your land line phone and call a loved one or a business associate. You pick up your cell and call a fringe person in your life as you drive home from work or traveling down the interstate. You can e-mail or g-mail a friend. You can send a fax or rent a billboard. You can skype someone. Has anyone here sent a text message since this service began? (Can somebody tell me if LOL means "Lots Of Love" or "Laugh Out Loud?") You can send a smoke signal or use sign language. Vlad is our friend in Russia. I communicate with him regularly by Viber. What is Viber? It is a way to text someone by internet. It is free! There are more ways to communicate today than at any other time in world history. This is also true:

There are more ways to be misunderstood today than any other time in our history. Do you know Brinkley's Law? It says, "If there is any way it can be misunderstood--by someone, somewhere, sometime--it will be misunderstood." When was the last time you were misunderstood trying to communicate? Perhaps, that is the reason God came into the world, taking the form of a human. The best kind of communication is still talking face to face.

This is Christmas Eve, and on Christmas Eve we ponder the wonder of the incarnation of God. When Mary looked into Jesus's face for the very first time, she was looking at the face of God. Just ponder that theological point for a moment. God left the perfection of heaven to enter this imperfect world. It is more than the human mind can handle. Augustine said, "*The incarnation of God is beyond all human understanding.*" Perhaps, one of the reasons he came into the world was to communicate with us. He didn't want there to be any misunderstanding. The safest form of communication is still face to face. This evening I want to talk about three things that God wants to communicate to you. Let me call them "revelations". If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

The Incarnation reveals the heart of God

This is revelation number one: The incarnation reveals the very heart of God.

John 3:16-17 says, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."* God came into the world to tell us that he loves you and me! You may remember this story:

The great Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard told the story of a prince who was running an errand for his father one day in the local village. As he did so, he passed through a very poor section of the town. Looking through the window of his carriage, he saw a beautiful young peasant girl walking along the street. He could not get her off his mind. Daily, he returned to that poor section of town hoping to see her. His heart yearned for her, but there was a problem. How could he develop a relationship with her? He could order her to marry him. It was in his power to do so. But, he wanted her to love him willingly. He could put on his royal garments and impress her with his regal entourage, and drive up to her front door with soldiers and a carriage drawn by six horses. But if he did that he would never be certain whether the girl loved him, or was simply overwhelmed with his power, position and wealth. The prince came up with another solution. He moved into the village dressed only as a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language. In time, the young peasant girl grew to know him, and then to love him. That is the story of Christmas!

The Incarnation reveals to us the very heart of God. The God of the universe is in love with you! He is in love with us! He could have impressed us with his power. He could have ordered us to love him. But God entered this world to share our interests and concerns to win our hearts. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

The Incarnation reveals our greatest human need

This is revelation number two: The Incarnation reveals our greatest human need. Romans 5:8 says, *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* God understands what many in our time have forgotten. Our greatest human need is not for an educator, scientist, economist, athlete or an entertainer. What we still need the most is a Savior. The Incarnation reveals to us our greatest human need, to be forgiven.

Sitting majestically atop the highest hill in Toledo, Spain, is the Alcazar, a 16th-century fortress. In the civil war of the 1930s, the Alcazar became a battleground when the Loyalists tried to oust the Nationalists, who held the fortress. During one dramatic episode of the war, the Nationalist leader received a phone call while in his office at the Alcazar. It was from his son, who had been captured by the Loyalists. The ultimatum: If the father didn't surrender the Alcazar to them, they would kill his son. The father weighed his options. After a long pause and with a heavy heart, he said to his son, "Then, die like a man." Let there be no doubt about it. Jesus died like a man.

It is impossible to separate the baby in the Nativity from the Savior on the cross thirty-three years later. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He died so we could live. The Incarnation reveals our greatest human need, forgiveness. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

The Incarnation reveals the mystery of God's plan.

This is revelation number three: The Incarnation reveals the mystery of God's plan.

1 Timothy 3:16 says, "*Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.*" From the very beginning, God's plan to save the world had been a mystery. The Incarnation reveals the mystery of God's plan.

The Hebrew world waited for generations for the coming Messiah. They knew he was going to be something special! They dreamed of his greatness, but they almost missed him because he was quite common. The story of the Nativity is filled with common people, which makes it so special. When the announcement was given by the angel it was given to common laborers in the fields, who their orthodox leaders had rejected. When the Messiah was born he was given to a common couple; from the world's perspective there was nothing special about Mary and Joseph. When the Magi appeared after following the star they went to the palace. They assumed a king would be born in a palace, but they found him in the barn. The mystery of God's plan is that it is entrusted to common people like you and me.

This is my question for you this evening: What are you doing for God? I know that is an intimidating question. I know it raises your insecurities. You feel like you are nothing special, which makes you perfect for God's service. The Incarnation reveals the mystery of God's plan. Never forget, God has a purpose for your life. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" I end with this story:

Cecil B. DeMille was making one of his great epic movies. He had six cameras at various points to pick up the overall action and five other cameras set up to film plot developments involving the major characters. The large cast had begun rehearsing their scene since 6 a.m. They went through it four times and now it was late afternoon. The sun was setting and there was just enough light to get the shot done. DeMille looked over the panorama, saw that all was right, and gave the command for action. One hundred extras charged up the hill; another hundred came storming down the same hill to do mock battle. In another location, Roman centurions lashed and shouted at two hundred slaves who labored to move a huge stone monument toward its resting place. Meanwhile the principal characters acted out, in close-up, their reactions to the battle on the hill. It took fifteen minutes to complete the scene. When it was over, DeMille yelled, "Cut!" and turned to his assistant, all smiles. "That was great!" he said. "It was, C.B.," the assistant yelled back. "It was fantastic! Everything went off perfectly!" Enormously pleased, DeMille turned to face the head of his camera crew to find out if

all the cameras had picked up what they had been assigned to film. He waved to the camera crew supervisor. From the top of the hill, the camera supervisor waved back, raised his megaphone, and called out, "Ready when you are, C.B!" The communication was poor. They hadn't filmed a single thing!

Don't let that story be your Christmas. It has been a wonderful scene. There have been colored lights and holiday decorations. There have been the cards and gifts. There is one at home waiting for you. There have been parties and special music. It has been fantastic, but don't miss what God is trying to tell you. Christmas is not just about the birth of a baby that came into the world two thousand years ago. It is about God himself, taking a human form to experience all that we experience. He came to make sure there was no miscommunication. He came to reveal his heart. He came to reveal his plan. He came to reveal our great need. This is Christmas Eve! Let the party begin! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"