

December 23, 2018  
John 3:16-17  
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### **“In the Flesh”**

**Good morning! It is a privilege -- and just a little bit intimidating -- to stand before you on Christmas Eve eve. A privilege because this is a very special season as we approach the celebration of the birth of Christ; it's a time which holds a lot of anticipation, expectation, and tradition. It's a bit intimidating as a preacher for all of the same reasons.**

**Through our children's stories, Angi has been sharing our Advent themes of Family, Neighborhood, Community and World. Our text from the gospel of John is one you've almost certainly heard before, but we don't usually read it at Christmas time: John's gospel doesn't include any account of the nativity and the birth of Jesus. John's gospel tells the story through a very broad lens -- if you're familiar with author James Michener it's a bit like one of his novels, which starts a story way back in the geologic era when the land mass was formed, or when the earliest settlers arrived on the land. We are sampling just a tiny part of John this morning: it doesn't tell us how Jesus' birth happened -- there are no angels or shepherds, not even Mary and Joseph -- but it tells us why Jesus' birth happened. John 3:16 is one of the clearest statements of God's purpose which we find in the gospels. To borrow a phrase, John 3:16 is the reason for the season.**

**You may know it by memory: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. There are some pretty big claims here, things which we ought not take for granted. The first is that God loves the world. Now, it seems pretty obvious to me why God would love the world -- it's a beautiful place, right? Mountains, beaches, a sunrise and sunset every single day, wonderful people -- some of whom are**

part of my family -- fluffy bunnies and chickies, rainbows, maybe even unicorns. You get that this is a pretty one-sided view from a place of privilege, right?

I'm still wrestling with what I heard Rev Samuel Dali preach earlier this month. He said the reason that the Nigerian church has hope and joy, is because the world is evil, and Christ is stronger than the world. He is speaking from the perspective of a persecuted community; a country where there is enough chaos that if you have to leave home to travel somewhere, there are no guarantees you will arrive at your destination or return home safely. He is speaking from the personal perspective of a father with an 18 year-old son who left the house several years ago and never returned. Not to minimize the hope and joy which people experience even in times of trouble, but I can see why Rev Dali would have a less optimistic view of the world than I do.

I believe that God's love for the world goes beyond whether the world is good or evil: clearly it is both, and a human perspective of which is which is not the most reliable measure: at least some members of the Boko Haram who have burned churches and killed Christians in Nigeria believed they were doing God's will. God loves the world because God created the world and even now is working for the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ. That was God's plan from the beginning -- the very beginning. The prologue of John tells us that In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light to all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

It is that light which we watch for and celebrate at Christmas, and it came into the world in the usual way of human life, to an unremarkable couple, in an un-exceptional setting. In short, God became just like us, which is completely amazing. Incarnation means to become flesh and blood: for you Spanish speakers, carne is the same Latin word which means "meat." Flesh and blood is . . . well, raw and bloody. That perfect idea -- the Word of God which brought forth the life and light of creation -- became flesh; the tender and completely vulnerable flesh of a newborn baby. Within every baby --

**every person -- is a spark of Incarnation; the life that came into being through the light of God. That light may be purest in a babies, who are naked in their innocence, but even the most vile and evil person we can imagine began life with that spark of Incarnation. That is why God loves the world, because the world was made by God and made from God.**

**It would make no sense for God's Son, the Word of God, to come into the world in the flesh as a newborn baby in order to condemn the world. The world had already been doing, and has continued to do a fine job of condemning itself. Evil is real and there may be times when evil is the only reality we can see, but evil never has the last word. God sent his Son Jesus Christ so that we could see and believe in the light which no evil or darkness can overcome.**

**Yesterday's Advent devotions included one of my favorite texts for a Christmas song by Brethren composer Steve Engle: it's the best Christmas song which no one has ever heard. The words are:**

**A little bit of heaven met a little bit of earth in a babe in a cradle  
of straw;  
From a tiny spark of heaven and a peasant birth came the One to  
save us all. Halleluiah!**

**This is a simple and as profound a definition of Incarnation as I know: the meeting of heaven and earth in Jesus Christ, a newborn baby in a manger, the only Son of God, and the Savior of the world.**

**Because every person came into being through the light of God's Word, there are as many images of Incarnation as there are people. No one knows what Jesus looked like in his human life, but I wanted to show you a few images which speak to me about Incarnation.**

**[Slide: Man with baby] This could be any father with a baby; I hope that Joseph had some moments like this with his infant son Jesus. I like to think that this could also illustrate the way God feels about the world: tender and protective, rather than angry or judgmental, but I know that parenting demands a full range of emotions. We don't know much about what Jesus was like as a child -- certainly by the age of 12 he had developed and mind of his own, and a sense of self**

that knew that his father's house was as likely to be the Temple in Jerusalem as it was a woodshop in Nazareth. I have been blessed with darn good children, but a perfect child would be a heavy responsibility. I hope that Joseph and Mary had some time to just be in love with their baby, and that God had some time to love creation -- maybe on that seventh day when it was all fresh and new, before all hell broke loose.

**[Slide: Baby feet]** I want to leave you with this image as you prepare for Christmas. God's plan to redeem the world from evil and sin depended on a tiny baby. The perfect Son of God, born into a world which was far from perfect. Jesus was born in a place which was unexceptional and probably unsanitary. He escaped Herod's jealousy and the slaughter of innocent baby boys in Bethlehem only to be taken as a refugee to a foreign country. As we heard two weeks ago, the people in his hometown planned to throw him off a cliff when he made them mad, and the leaders of the Jewish establishment plotted his death, and eventually got the Roman government to execute him. These tiny feet are what God gave us to guide us on the path to peace. They were feet which were nailed to a cross so that we might not perish, but have everlasting life.

This, sisters and brothers, is the reason for the season. Because as beautiful and as flawed as the world is, God created it, and through the Word brought life and light. And as beautiful and flawed as we are as people, individually and collectively, God loves us, too. Jesus came to live in our neighborhood and walk in our communities, to teach and to heal; to convict us of sin and invite us into confession and repentance; to work for the redemption and the salvation of the world. At Christmas we celebrate the Incarnate God--a little bit of heaven and a little bit of earth -- a small beginning which changed the world forever. Merry Christmas, and God bless you.