

“Through Whatever Our Family Endures” based on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a and Luke 1:26-38

First of Two Sermons from Pastor Drew for Sunday, Dec. 24, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

There was David, resting on his throne in a palace made of cedar, while God was outside where the ark of God had no walls around it. It had no protection, only curtains. The impulse of David was to build a house, a permanent and fixed structure. He wanted to give God security and Nathan’s response was, “Go follow your heart. Go for it.” But God had different plans. The Lord instead will make David into a house, a dynasty. The prophet who was supposed to consult with God and then speak for God, just said, “Follow your heart,” when God instead desired to make for David a house that would rule forever.

Then in Luke’s gospel, Mary is engaged to be married, still a virgin, when an angel comes and says, “You’re going to be pregnant, but not in the usual way.” No, the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, and the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God, to take the throne of David and his reign would have no end. This child, though fully human, would be no ordinary child. This child will be God in our human flesh.

These two pieces of scripture show us two different responses to God. David longs to do something for God – to give God a place of security, a fixed residence. Mary responds to God by accepting insecurity and risk, in the task to care for a vulnerable God, who will be born a child, marked by the shame of this world.

Ambrose of Milan wrote a poem some 1500 years ago, that is our hymn, “O Savior of the Nations, Come” and the translation in our hymnals has to fit the music. But in going through it for our Advent devotional in the Latin, it might be better translated more literally as, “The woman’s belly did swell, and shame’s barriers still held. But a flag of virtue glowed, and the temple of God dwelled.”

In that time, and to some degree today, but less, saying “yes,” to God put Mary’s own life at risk with the Holy child. At the least, in a best-case scenario, it put her reputation and the child’s in jeopardy. It was a barrier of shame. She would be marked by this, at best, as one having been impatient to wait. At worst, she could be called an adulterer whose child would be a “mamzer,” illegitimate, the child of a mother and father unable to be married because their marriage is forbidden by law. This would render the child’s life as judged for their entire life, as one ineligible for any religious rites or honors, including entering the congregation in the temple.

David thinks the curtains of the tent in which God travelled with the people of Israel is not befitting of God, and he wants to be the one to build a temple for God. Yet God chose to be born a human, again to quote Ambrose’s imagery, “Emerging from his chamber, *shame* was now a royal court, two in one, both God and human, he rejoiced to run his path.” Indeed, we can agree with Ambrose in the first stanza, that every age will be amazed, that such a birth befits God.

For the Apostles, who, like Jesus, were Jewish, Jesus brought clarity and fulfillment, not a replacement when they read Hebrew scripture, but a revelation of mystery, which is the things that are contained in scripture, but not noticed until more is revealed. This is what we see in Jesus. This passage in David could talk about Solomon, absolutely, but when David’s line fell, many Jewish interpreters continued to look for a Messiah of this line. What we see in Jesus then is the fulfillment of this Messiah which the Apostles saw in Jesus the Word of God, God’s reason, revealed in a helpless child asleep in a manger, or a feeding trough for animals.

Beloved, today, the traditional theme of the fourth week of Advent is love. We stand on the precipice of love descending into our humanity, becoming one of us, to be Emmanuel, God with us, God in solidarity with our humanity. We celebrate the atonement and reconciliation of all humanity with God. The conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit which was proclaimed by Gabriel, is the start of atonement. This is a made up word of one of the first translators which combined, "At One Ment" to mean the unification of God and humanity, which started on Christmas. The ministry of reconciliation is the turning point toward the redemption of the whole world, which is inaugurated, or begun, in this Jesus, born a child in our limits.

We cannot separate the two. The 33-year moment of Jesus's life is but a blip in thousands or billions of years. Therefore, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus is one event for us. It is the turning point in the grand narrative of history, when this is the moment the anointed king, the great prophet, and great high priest, is born of a woman, cared for in a family with many hurdles to climb, embodying the fullness of the people of Israel, as the true human.

At the same time, this child embodies the Creator of all things, who will endure the shame of the Roman cross, rejected by religious and worldly powers alike to die for us, rise for us, and ascend back to heaven for us. This is so that we might all be children of God, adopted as heirs in the Holy Spirit and empowered to do good in this world.

And so, the secondary theme which we have been following is of God being with us, through all that our family endures – and we see this in the person of Jesus first. In the short version, his family tree was a mess – an absolute mess. I'll spare the details but I assure you, there is nothing in your family tree or mine, that was not already in the mess that is Jesus's family tree. That's the point.

The God who made all things did not need David's protection in a temple just as God right now does not need our protection. Instead, chose to enter into our humanity through David's own messy house, to be vulnerable to the systems of shame, starting with his birth, and into his life on the margins, then even to death on a cross. This was the path run by the Holy One of Israel to whom all glory and honor is rightly given.

And so, we stand now, in the challenges of this life in a changing world when our faith is scorned by many, taken to extremes by others, and yet, we are not alone. We are not alone because by faith and by the faithfulness of this child, we are established, to share in the fullness of our human calling. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit, which pours love in our hearts to face whatever this world has to offer – even death – to share in God's work of reconciliation with all people – every nation, tribe, and language – through love, mercy, hope, and faith received through the Spirit. All of this is so that we might be a part of that promise in the prayer which Jesus taught us, *"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

This is the love of God: That each of you is loved by the Lord and known by name. Each of you is called to be part of a community of faith, an assembly called out by God. We are called out to know that we are loved and share that love, no matter what the cost and no matter what we endure. When we see God's image in our neighbor – everyone we meet – we will be blessed or brought closer to God by them. Yet, at the same time, to them we are given the opportunity to serve as the hands and feet of Christ in this world. And so, it is in this good news that I say to you, "Merry Christmas." Amen.

Second of Two Sermons: "One of Us" based on Luke 2:1-20

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Christmas Eve, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Tonight, we celebrate Christmas, the birth of a baby boy named Jesus in Bethlehem. In his honor, we have decorated our church and our homes, both inside and out. Because of Christmas, we have listened to Mariah Carey everywhere we go. We have purchased gifts, presents, gift cards, and probably too much food. We've sent out cards, or feel guilty because we haven't, or did so late.

Perhaps we've even thought about our hopes for the season – maybe in what presents we want, or just the response that we hope to receive for a gift we've given. Everything feels so very rushed, there's not enough time, and yet, here we are sitting in church with so much left to be done.

If I've made you anxious to the point that now you hope I would just stop talking, and you're even tempted to walk out to go finish whatever it is that needs to be done, bear with me. I'm about to welcome you into the leading role in any number of Christmas specials. You know – the ones centered on individuals, families, and communities, that have forgotten the true meaning of Christmas because they're caught in the 'what-to-dos,' the commercialism, the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses, and superficiality that all hide what Christmas is really all about.

But if we've seen these movies a million times, why are they all still so relevant? How many times do we need a reminder of what Christmas is all about? Are we ever going to just drop the to-do list, and stop spending so much money? Will we ever stop trying to keep up with our neighbors and stop spending so much time and energy on outward appearances? Will there ever be a Christmas that is just about Christmas? Will we ever answer for ourselves – What is Christmas really all about, finally – once and for all?

Perhaps the question, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" is not a question for just Charlie Brown to ask each year, but one all of us should ask. And perhaps we should ask not just as individuals, but as a family, as a church, as a culture and society. Linus answers Charlie with our reading today from Luke's gospel. Linus is right, it is about this little boy Jesus whose birth we celebrate, but still, we are left with the remaining question: What is this child's birth all about?

I could give you a line-by-line exposition with key Greek terms in each line in the Luke passage. Instead, I'll tell you about a song written by a man named Eric, some 30-odd years ago. It's a song which he wrote in one night to impress a girl, and it worked. The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, musician married the Stockholm, Sweden artist. They are still married, having raised two children together. He wrote the song, but it became a hit for someone else, rising to number 4 on the US Billboard charts in 1995, and if I started singing it right now, you would probably be able to sing with me, especially if you are between about 40-ish, and your mid-60s.

The woman who made the song a hit was able to carry its words humility, trepidation, and even a little bit of humor. She did it so perfectly that probably no one else singing the song would have made it a hit. But what's more, the song's popularity may have been fed in part by the controversy and the objection of some Christians, who thought it belittled the transcendence and honor of God and not to mention the English enthusiasts among us, who likely objected to the song's bad grammar, since it fails to use the proper verb tense for a subjunctive hypothetical. Can you guess the song yet?

The song of course is “One of Us,” from debut album of Joan Osborne. The refrain asks the question, *“What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home?”* What if the God people talk about with all honor and glory, was one of us?

I remember the song, with its bridge of “God is great, yeah, yeah, God is good,” was actually controversial among some Christians, because we bristle at the idea. We bristle at the idea that the God we believe in, serve, and worship, could be referred to as a “slob like one of us.” And then, the lesser-known controversy of the English grammarians, is that a hypothetical should be phrased, “were one of us.” Stand down Bruce. Stand down June. It’s ok, because as it is phrased, it carries a profound point to consider tonight: “What if God was one of us?”

Each of you is here for one reason or another tonight – you know why you think you came. You may be here out of a deep faith, perhaps with a deep intellectual commitment to maintaining your faith. You may be here because of tradition, and in the desire for a complete Christmas, you have to have the candlelight service. You may be here because you love your family and want to be with them. Or you are here because they made you come.

I know in this room and reading this sermon, that there are a range of beliefs and ideas in your heads, whether political, social, philosophical, religious, and more. Some in this room even likely struggle believing in God, enduring all this superstition we’re doing, as you see it, for the sake of family, tradition, or something else.

I’m not up here to convince you of anything right now, but I instead ask all of you – from the most religious who want to guard the dignity of God at all costs, to the most irreligious among you who have no concern for a God whatsoever – to just consider the implication of such a question: “What if God was one of us?” Assuming, there were a creator of the universe for argument’s sake. So, assuming there is a creator of all reality, what does it mean to consider that somehow, this Creator became a human being? But not just appearing in the form of one, like a shapeshifter or mirage, but born a little baby, whose crib was a manger, a feeding trough for animals.

What’s it all about if we see this all-powerful being put in the charge of two people, who in presenting him to the temple, could only afford the offering of two pigeons, rather than a lamb and a dove, as required for those with the means to do so? What is this Christmas all about when these parents were made to flee, to run from persecution into a strange and even hostile land, to be refugees until it was safe to return to their native land? What is Christmas all about if this child we celebrate grows up to be an itinerant preacher, teacher and healer, who would be nailed to a Roman Cross, betrayed by some of his own to die a shameful death?

This is the power of the incarnation – namely the belief that God experienced our humanity – from birth and then in every aspect of our life, be it sickness or just going potty, grief and sadness, joy and celebration, the weakness of our human will, the limits of our human minds, the shame imposed by human culture, and the pain and suffering we endure, even death.

Christmas is about God being united to our humanity, in full and complete solidarity with you and with me. This is why Linus’s answer is correct, and why our reading is so important. It’s why the church for 2,000 years has proclaimed without fear, that Jesus is the Lord, the God of Israel.

The miraculous sign of God being present in our text today was not the angels. No, the miraculous sign proclaimed by those angels was a baby lying in a manger. Christmas is all about solidarity, empathy, community, and family, not because these are good things in and of themselves, which they largely are. What Christmas is all about is God's generosity in Jesus, and his solidarity, empathy, community, and extending his family to all of us.

The incarnation or embodiment of God as an infant, from the beginning in the virgin birth, is not a statement of morality, but the emphasis that this reality is God from day one. Jesus is not portrayed as simply a human being, who turns out to be pretty awesome. He's not raised from the dead because he led a good life. He's not adopted by God for what he achieved. Jesus is presented to us as fully God in our flesh. This means God experienced our life, as I said before.

This is the difference between thinking of God as a charitable donor who gives to the poor, commendable and amazing as that is, and a person who becomes poor to live with, care for, and raise up those in poverty. Both are needed, but they are different. God's grace is not just saying to us, "Here's the present you asked for." God's grace is the gift of God humbly choosing to become one of us.

There's a difference between a "present," and a "gift." A pastor friend's wife taught me this, and I think applies here. Giving a present is presenting someone something they have asked for. Giving a gift is giving someone something, that you want them to have.

God becoming one of us – just a slob, someone judged by society, poor and eventually killed. That's not what the faithful asked for, nor was it what the unbelievers wanted either. No, God becoming one of us was the gift of grace. It is favor that we did not earn. It's not something we deserve, whether we wanted it or not. We might receive solidarity with God by this gift of sharing in God's life and receiving an inheritance that begins with the downpayment of the Holy Spirit, to live in and among us, to empower us, pouring love in our hearts so that we might love God and love one another, thereby changing the world, through the ministry of reconciliation.

So, indeed I'm grateful to Eric and Joan for their song asking, "What if God was one of us?" Because it helps us ponder that 2,000 years ago, when a child was born into this world, he revealed for us who God really is – the self-giving, faithful, and loving creator – by being the self-giving, faithful, and loving human being that we are all meant to be.

Sisters and brothers, we may never escape the traps of this season. There's never enough time. We will likely always hold on to our insecurities, but I want to assure you that you are loved no matter who you are, your identity and what you believe or even what you don't,

Yes, no matter what, you are loved by God. so much so, that God shared in your humanity for you, so that you might turn from the temptations of this world and turn toward God who pursues you with open arms. When we turn back to God in Christ, we have the opportunity to join others in church, or a small group, or however we gather as God's called community. We join together to share God's love given to us with the world around us. That Charlie Brown is what Christmas is all about. Amen.