

Sermon File # 687

Scripture Text: John 1:14-18

Sermon Title: *Christmas: Celebrating the Incarnation*

Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts

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Christmas: Celebrating the Incarnation

Introduction:

Open your Bibles to John 1:14-18, as today we conclude our Advent series from John's prologue, or introduction, verses 1-18 of the first chapter of his gospel. In the first verses (1-5) we noted that Jesus Christ, whose birth we are celebrating, is the eternal Word of God. In the second passage (6-9) we were challenged by John the Baptist as an example to us of an authentic witness to the Word. Last Sunday we marveled at the wonderful gift of Christ, the greatest gift of all (10-13). Today we come to the lofty climax of this introduction (14-18), and are encountered by one of the grandest passages in the entire Bible (Whitacre, 58).

I suggest that our text for today will provide for every one of us the greatest reason to celebrate Christmas. Follow as I read the entire prologue for purposes of review and context; but our focus will be on **John 1:14-18**.

I was conversing with one of our people who has taken very seriously the challenge to use the Christmas Season as an opportunity to witness for Christ. This brother shared with me his conversation at an office Christmas dinner, when he asked a colleague and an office manager what they were doing to celebrate Christmas this year. After relating his plans to celebrate Christmas by worshiping Christ in special

church services, both of these fellow workers acknowledged they were unbelievers and that for them Christmas meant only a traditional time of feasting and partying with family and friends and perhaps exchanging gifts.

Walking around the shopping center this past week, I heard a fair mixture of secular and Christian Christmas music being piped into the stores and hallways, which were decorated with traditional religious symbols as well as with the secular Santa Claus motif. Merchants try their best to create a festive atmosphere to encourage people to get the “Christmas spirit,” which has to be fabricated by the right atmosphere of music, decorations and traditional Christmas party and feasting activities. I think the Christmas “spirit” is whatever induces people to spend money on gifts.

On our church website, Denzil posted a story about a little girl who received a distorted and erroneous conclusion in her visit to a live nativity scene. What should have been her discovery of the Baby Jesus in the manger turned out to be jolly old Santa Claus in the place where Jesus should have been.

As we begin this final week before Christmas Day, I want to challenge you to join with me in celebrating Christmas as never before. Whatever your condition and circumstances today, I call upon you to celebrate the Incarnation, the fact that the eternal Word of God became a human being, taking upon himself the likeness of our humanity, becoming like one of us. When we understand the significance of the Incarnation, we’ll have more than ample reason to celebrate Christmas as never before.

Let’s try to wrap our minds around what CS Lewis called the Grand Miracle and the Central Miracle. He noted that “Every other miracle prepares for this, exhibits this, or results from this....The fitness, and therefore credibility, of the particular miracles depend on their relations to the Grand Miracle” (Lewis, 112). If you can believe the Grand, the Central Miracle, you should have no problem believing the miracles in the Old Testament narratives or the miracle of the Virgin Birth, the miracles Jesus performed of feeding the multitudes, of his healing the sick, raising the dead, walking on water and calming the storms. You should also have no problem of believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and his ascension back into the heavenly realms, where he reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords.

In other words, to believe the essence of the Christmas story is to believe the miracle that will open the pathway to faith and eternal life, a life of following this risen Jesus as your Lord. To understand and believe the truth of the Incarnation will not only transform your idea of Christmas—it will change your life now and your everlasting destiny.

To disbelieve the truth of the Incarnation, on the other hand, is to close the door on all the miracles and even on the possibility of your faith in the saving life and power of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is either this Grand Miracle that opens to us the truth of the Gospel of Christ or, if it is met with unbelief, becomes nonsense and renders this grand prologue as simply flowery but meaningless prose (Carson, 130). To reject the truth of the Incarnation is to decide to consign Christmas to just another event that has meaning only in the temporary and often disappointing experiences of traditional celebrations. We can celebration of the incarnation of Christ, first of all...

By seeing his glory

The word “glory” refers to God’s appearance of light, beauty, awe, and splendor. The glory of God is his wealth, the summation of his attributes, his nature and his character. God is worthy of receiving even greater glory from our praise and worship. The eternal Word, Christ the Son of God, made and makes known to us the glory of God. We see his glory...

Through the descent of Christ

Whatever the secular world experiences at Christmas, I see it as a far cry from the celebration of the shepherds at the birth of Christ. They experienced glory. This is the glory the “great company of the heavenly host” announced on Christmas night:

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:13-14).

“The Word became flesh” (verse 14), and in becoming flesh (Greek *sarx*), the Logos “participated in man’s creaturely weakness, the characteristic meaning of ‘flesh’ in the Bible” (Beasley-Murray, 14). The eternal Son became the God Man, taking on himself the very nature of a servant and was made in human likeness (Philippians 2:7).

That God could become a man, retaining his full deity and assuming simultaneously our full humanity, is a miracle. Christmas is the celebration of the fact that eternal God could be, at Bethlehem, compressed into the size of the span of a man’s hand. More than that, the eternal Co-creator, through Mary’s impregnation by the Holy Spirit, became a zygote and then an embryo in the womb of the young virgin.

This declaration of the incarnation of the eternal Word is a straightforward, “almost shocking” expression, amazing in its “unambiguous” claim (Carson, 126). In fact, both John’s Greek and Jewish readers would have been stunned by John’s statement that a holy God could take upon himself human flesh. The Greeks could not imagine a holy deity inhabiting human flesh, which they considered inherently evil. And for a pious Jew to read that God who dwelt in his Shekinah glory in Moses’ tabernacle would also dwell in the person of Jesus Christ was equally unthinkable (Burge, *NLTSB*, 1768, *NIVAC*, 59).

Also, the fact that Jesus’ humanity and deity were complete, that he could be 100% divine and also 100% human, is a mystery and miracle, and yet a fact that forms “the bedrock of a Christian understanding of Christ (Burge, *NLTSB*, 1768). The incarnation of Christ “involved no compromise of his deity.” He didn’t degrade himself, but rather elevated humankind to *himself* (Tozer, 17).

The Incarnation is a miracle of means but also of motive. It is a miracle of God's creative power that God *could* become a man. It's a miracle of God's redeeming love that He *would* become a man. And this descent of the Incarnation, the Word becoming a man, was to show us the nature and likeness and the glory of God. We see the glory of the Incarnation through Christ's descent but also...

Through the dwelling of Christ

Christ showed us the glory of God by dwelling with us. When John describes how the Word made his dwelling among us, he is referring to the tabernacle and the Holy of Holies that accompanied the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings and pilgrimage. In the Most Holy Place God's glorious presence was symbolized and inspired their worship and encouraged their obedience. John said the Word "tabernacled" with us (verse 14). The God of glory chose to humble himself to stay in "an uncomfortable tent" for us.

In the US a popular holiday activity is to camp out with a travel trailer pulled by an auto. People like to "rough it," that is, return to a primitive way of life, and they find that relaxing. To me, I think it's a pity to reject modern comforts. My idea of "roughing it" is to stay in a two or three star hotel rather than a four-star one! A better illustration for Jesus' "camping out/dwelling" with us (verse 14) would be the "camping out" of special military forces in the mountains of Afghanistan, in their dangerous mission to seek out the enemy hidden in those caves. Jesus' mission was not simply dangerous. He knew, even before his incarnation, that it would be horribly fatal. And his mission was not one of destruction but rather of rescue and redemption.

The Word who came to dwell among us is "full of grace and truth" (14) and "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (17). God incarnate, Jesus Christ, is God's speech, telling us about God and who he is. CH Spurgeon said, "Jesus is to the Father what speech is to us; he is the unfolding of the Father's thoughts, the revelation of the Father's heart" (Spurgeon, 121ff).

In the New Testament Jesus, the incarnate Son, revealed the glory of God through miracles, such as the great catch of fish, that caused his disciples to fall before him in wonder and fear (Luke 5:1-11). The glory of the Incarnation is also a glory that draws us to God as a loving and gracious God, whose desire is to save and to bless us as his children. And the cross of Christ is the highest revelation of his glory, and in the cross we are drawn to our God of perfect love (John 12:27-33).

The glory of God is symbolized in the light of God—his beauty and brilliance that shines in and pierces the darkness. God's light overcomes the darkness, which is what Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah's birth in Isaiah 9:2. Darkness describes the world's ignorance about God before and apart from the coming and the presence of Jesus Christ. The truth about God came shining into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, who declared himself to be the Light of the World (John 8:12). Jesus Christ is the Truth about God and about us (John 14:6). The truth is, "No one has seen God" apart from faith in Jesus Christ, the Incarnation (verse 18).

I think of the little girl in Sunday School who was busily and intently drawing and coloring a picture of a large face. “What are you drawing, Sweetie?” her teacher inquired. “God,” she replied confidently. “Nobody has seen God, Honey, so we don’t know what he looks like.” “They will when I get through,” she answered.

We know what God looks like now that Jesus has revealed him and “drawn” him for us. In verse 18 we read that “God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” This is saying that Jesus, the One and Only, the “only begotten Son” (KJV) is God in the flesh. As God in the flesh, Jesus has made God known to us, has explained him to us (Greek exegesato) meaning “exegeted/explained God for us” (Beasley-Murray, 16).

Peter, James and John were permitted to behold the glory of Christ in his Transfiguration on the mountain (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). Therein they were permitted to glimpse a degree of the glory he enjoyed and to which he would return in heaven. Even before the cross, the disciples recognized the glorious holiness and power of Jesus that made them aware of their sinfulness:

“When Simon Peter saw this (Jesus’ miracle of giving the disciples a great catch of fish), he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!’” (Luke 5:8).

The glory of the cross reveals the truth about sin. Christ was crucified; the Lamb was slain for the sins of the world. He, the eternal Son and Word of God, emptied himself of heavenly glory and splendor which he had with the Father for all eternity (Philippians 2:5-11). Christ entered our human situation by being born as a helpless baby. And he sought no glory for himself. He lived in humble and poor circumstances and experienced opposition and rejection from mankind, including his own people, the Jewish nation. And his ultimate rejection was the cross, on which he experienced his horrible suffering and death as our Savior and substitute. He relinquished his heavenly glory in his life of obedience to the Father and service to us sinners. Yet, in his outpoured life for us, his glory was revealed. It was the glory of his righteousness and perfect love. And, his cross was the greatest glory he revealed because in the cross we see his holiness and his amazing love. And, the Father raised him from the dead and has exalted him and crowned him with greater glory than he had with the Father before he came to earth. Christ on the cross is the picture of a God of perfect love, mercy, grace and forgiveness. This is the glory of John 3:16.

The Incarnation is glory that reveals the Son—just as light reveals the dirt on our clothes soiled in the dark. Jesus showed us a perfectly holy life, and we all appear soiled next to him. Yet we are geniuses in rationalizing our sin and denying responsibility for our actions, even to the point of blaming the devil, says the late James Boice, who told the story of a little girl named Mary Ann:

One day Mary Ann “got into a fight with her brother. The mother stopped the fighting by yanking Mary up sharply and sitting her down in a corner. She asked, ‘Mary Ann, why did you let the devil put it into your heart to pull your brother’s hair and kick his shins?’ Mary Ann thought a minute and then said, ‘Well, maybe the devil did put it into my head to pull brother’s hair, but kicking his shins was my own idea.’” Boice

noted “That was tremendous theology, and it shows what’s wrong with the world. It is not what the devil, the environment, or our history makes us do what makes the world such a bad place, but what we do. The truth about the problem of man is that man himself is the problem” (Boice, 114f).

The Lord Jesus shows us our sin and the nature of sin, and the horrible fact that we have become proud of our sin. But Christ came into the world to save us, and to show us the way out of our sin to the Father. Looking at the cross of Christ, the means of our salvation, we can see the glory of the Savior. Seeing our sinfulness and need for forgiveness is what is known as conviction of sin, which is the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:5-11). Although Jesus dreaded the horrible suffering of the cross, nevertheless he submitted to it, knowing it would be the highest revelation of the glory of God, drawing us sinners to God (John 12:27-33).

This is glory revealed to all who believe. A lot of people saw Jesus, and even his miracles. Many saw his raising Lazarus from the grave, and yet refused to believe. By faith alone we can say with John, “We have seen his glory.”

We celebrate the incarnation of Christ also...

By receiving his grace

We have received the fullness of his grace, and one blessing after another (16). It’s interesting that the word “grace” appears only here in the Gospel of John. Yet, the meaning and work of grace appear throughout the book “in narrative form” (Whitacre, 62) as Jesus reveals himself and draws people to himself through his unconditional love, demonstrated supremely on the cross.

Grace is defined as “God’s unfailing love” (*NLT*, verse 17), and covers all of God’s undeserved favor—what we desperately need but could never deserve. The Bible speaks of what we know of as God’s general grace, his goodness in behalf of all people, such as Jesus describes in Matthew 5:45. But the grace John refers to is grace...

That gives us life

Jesus is the explanation of God to us, telling and showing us all we need to know about God in order to know him personally in a saving relationship. Jesus shows and tells us all we need to know about God and he does so perfectly. Until Jesus came, mankind groped about in darkness seeking the light of life. As Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah,

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2).

But the glory of the incarnate Christ is most perfectly seen in his suffering and death on the cross. Herein we see the incarnate One, “full of grace and truth.” We see him on the cross as the God of perfect love, willing to become sin for us as our sin-bearer and punishment substitute.

In verse 18 John says that the One and Only, the eternal Word, God the Son, made known to us the God no one has ever seen. The Bible is the story of his seeking a relationship with mankind. In the Garden, God had perfect fellowship with Adam and Eve before their fall into sin and estrangement from him. Afterwards, the Bible tells of God's drawing man back into a relationship with himself. The law served to show us that our efforts at moral perfection, the requirement for fellowship with holy God, were a failure.

Before and apart from the incarnation of Christ in Jesus, religious people have presumptuously claimed to know God and to have earned his favor and approval. Jesus encountered this false security and self-righteousness in his religious opponents, who were his worst enemies and the ones who generated his crucifixion. Jesus told them they were truly blinded to the reality of God that was to be seen in his life and ministry. Their spiritual blindness was due to their false claim to be able to see and their inability and unwillingness to admit their need for spiritual sight and insight (John 9:35-41).

There's a crucial distinction between sight and insight. For example, the shepherds saw and heard the announcement of the angel and responded with faith and obedience and worship. The wise men said, "We have seen his star." Apparently they saw in faith and with obedience. When the baby Jesus was taken by his parents to the temple for his dedication, the elderly saints Anna and Simeon responded to Jesus' appearing with faith and worship.

Grace that saves gives us insight that breaks through spiritual darkness. The life story of slave trader turned pastor and hymn writer, John Newton, is one of seeking and saving grace. As James Boice wrote,

"In his very early years Newton had been raised in a Christian home in England; but his parents died when he was only six years old and he went to live with an unbelieving relative. There Christianity was mocked, and he was abused. Finally, to escape these conditions, Newton ran away to sea, joining the British navy. He fell into gross sin; it gained a hold on him. He eventually deserted the navy and went to...Africa...for only one purpose and that was to 'sin his fill.'" There Newton once again was horribly abused and his life reduced to an animal existence.

After a time Newton fled from the compound and boarded a slave ship and got into trouble because of misconduct. After breaking into the ship's rum supply, he became so drunk he fell overboard. He was saved from drowning when an officer rescued him by thrusting a harpoon into his thigh and hauling him back into the ship. "The harpoon made such a wound that years later Newton could still put his hand into the fist-sized opening."

Near the end of the voyage from Africa to Scotland, a fierce storm threatened to sink the ship. After days of joining the slaves in pumping water out of the ship, Newton became terrified that the ship would sink. Bible verses about God's love and the death of Christ which he had heard as a child came to mind, "and as he remembered them he was miraculously transformed. He was born again." Newton went on to

become a highly educated pastor, teacher and preacher, even preaching to the queen the message of God's transforming grace (Boice, 110f).

We all know the familiar words of Newton's world-famous hymn:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Apart from grace we are blinded by sin and unbelief. As Isaiah prophesied, sinful unbelief keeps us from recognizing and esteeming the Suffering Servant/Messiah for who he is (Isaiah 53:2-3). Apart from God's life-giving grace, we are, like John Newton, spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1). The Apostle Paul says our eyes were blinded until the light of the knowledge of the glory of God shone in our hearts and minds (2 Corinthians 4:3-6).

Because of the incarnation of Christ we receive grace...

That gives one blessing after another

As we see him as Savior and receive and submit to him as Lord, then we experience the new birth, which is the beginning of a life of blessing, "one blessing after another" (verse 16). The grace by which we are saved is with us "to meet every need that arises" (Tasker, 48). The life of the believer is one of constant access to the blessings of God. These begin with the indwelling Holy Spirit who changes, empowers, comforts and guides us. These blessings of grace include the community of faith, the church, that gives us fellowship, encouragement and a context for worship and service.

Verse 16 should be read in the light of the Apostle Paul's testimony, who said, in the context of his extreme suffering, that the Lord assured him with these words: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). And, the believer is called to participate in the narrative of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. We must share in his sufferings in order to share in his glory, both now and especially in the life to come (Romans 8:17).

The incarnation of Christ assures us that when Christ became a man, and took upon himself our humanity, God fully redeemed our fallen and sin-sick humanity and lifted it to heaven. Christ fully participated in our human condition. As Hebrews says, he was tempted in every way we are, yet he was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He experienced in his incarnation the full range of human weakness, suffering, and sickness. And in his death on the cross he carried our sins and sickness and broken-ness. And by grace he has redeemed us to be his instruments of grace toward others.

We who have received his grace and have been transformed by his truth are free to make him known to others. This is our purpose and calling—to know him and to make him known. There is a verse in John's first letter that seems a deliberate parallel with verse 18 in our text. Here John says, "No one has ever seen God, but

God the One and Only (i.e., Jesus), who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Now notice what John says in his letter to Christians in 1 John 4:12: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us (is "incarnated" in us) and his love is made complete in us." Our calling is to be incarnations of Jesus in the world, even as Jesus was the perfect incarnation of the Father. God purposes that we make him known through our Christ-like living and love for one another.

We best glorify him in our taking up our cross and following him, not in self-assertion, but in self-denial and sacrifice. In our dying to self others best and most clearly see the crucified, dying Jesus in us. We have received grace after grace, but also grace...

That will lead us safely home

John now has seen the full glory of Christ Jesus in heaven. In his first epistle, chapter 3, John writes about this future glory, and how we will share it:

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Now we who believe are in Christ, and we participate in his death. Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). Because in his suffering and death and his resurrection Christ conquered sin and death, we by grace through faith share in his victory. Because Christ is now in heaven in his risen, glorified, yet human body we are incorporated into the Triune Godhead. Our physical bodies will be raised and we too, like Christ today, will be perfectly in God and he in us. Christ who is now in us, through the Spirit, is our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27b). When John saw an angel when he was receiving the Revelation, so our impulse would be to fall down before anyone who is now in heaven, and has been glorified (Revelation 19:10).

If Christmas is a special celebration in heaven, then it is a glorious one. Those of you who have lost loved ones can be sure your departed, believing loved one is reveling in the fullness of God's glory and blessing that we can not even imagine.

Conclusion:

So, I'm challenging us to make our Christmas celebration a heavenly one. I spoke with one of you yesterday about your dismay over how secular Christmas in this and in most western cultures has become. This sister, like me, was unable to find even one Christmas card that indicated anything at all about Christmas as the birth of Christ! It's sad to see the diminishing of the symbols that speak of the story of Jesus' birth. Yet, we shouldn't be surprised that the world celebrates only the secular side of the holiday. It's all they know.

We, on the other hand, have great cause to celebrate. I think of our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church, who are forced to celebrate Christmas in secret. Some of them are being especially scrutinized during the Christmas Season

because their opponents know that the birth of Christ calls for a celebration that is contagious and their joyful exuberance is contagious.

Whatever our circumstances, with or without the trees, lights, gifts, parties and family feasts, we can all truly celebrate the incarnation of Jesus. Because of his birth, not only our lives but the future of all creation is gloriously bright.

A local newspaper in the US published an ad in the religious news section by a local Unitarian Universalist Church. Because this humanistic organization rejects the saving uniqueness of Christ and the necessity of the cross, all they can offer is a celebration of the season, whatever that means. All they can offer is a vacuous, warm “fellowship,” and a sense of acceptance of diversity, but no message of a Savior who has the power to change lives that worship and trust him and his atoning death.

We can celebrate the glory of the Christ of the cross and the empty tomb, the one who came in lowliness but who will return in glory and triumph. We can also revel in his abundant grace that overflows into our lives and keeps on giving long after other gifts have faded away.

His incarnation, his presence with us is the meaning of Christmas. Let’s go celebrate!

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Reflect on/discuss the definition of the incarnation of Christ: a) in light of the Trinity, and b) in light of the full deity and humanity of Christ.
2. In light of the above, why do you think CS Lewis said that the incarnation of Christ is “the Grand Miracle” and the central miracle of the Christian faith?
3. What is the meaning of “glory,” and particularly the glory of Christ?
4. In what ways did Christ reveal his glory to the disciples? What was the greatest revelation of his glory?
5. How is seeing the glory of Christ important in leading to faith in Christ?
6. What does it mean to be saved by grace alone? What connection do works have with faith and grace?
7. What do you think John means (Verse 16) by our receiving one blessing after another?
8. How does the understanding of the incarnation of Christ affect your celebration of Christmas this year?

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