

From Heaven To A Crap Stall

(Philippians 2:5-11)

Some of us here may feel familiar with the Christmas story to the point of tedium, boredom, and maybe even numbness. After all, around this time of year we hear the saga of Joseph and Mary read and referenced countless times to the degree that we may be inoculated to its meaning. But the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are not the only places in the Bible where the event of Christmas is written about.

St. Paul summarized the message of Christmas in his letter to the Philippians by saying:

Philippians 2:5-8

“When the time came, God set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, He stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process.”

There are several more references to the event of Christmas in Paul, John, and the Book of Revelation and in each the focus is the same - God’s coming to earth as a human being... God squeezing all of His glory into an infant child! This is, of course, what the “incarnation” is all about – God becoming human that we might see Him, touch Him, and hear Him personally.

Of course the Scripture is not the only occasion we are presented with the idea of God becoming a human being. We hear it sung in our Christmas Carols. The Great **English Carol** “Once in Royal David’s City” expresses the majesty of Christmas with these elegant words:

“He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall:
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
Lived on earth, our Savior holy.”

So... this is what we hear referenced throughout these days of Advent and Christmas – the great God of the Universe, creator of heaven and earth, squeezing all of His glory into a human body for your sake and mine.

So what was it like for God to leave heaven? This is what I wish to focus us on this morning. What must it have been like for Him to strip Himself of glory for the sake of entering our cold, dark, and sin sick world? We Christians are a bit casual with this mystery of Christmas... that the Creator of the universe would choose to abandon His splendor for the sake of taking up residence in an inhospitable corner of His universe. I can only conclude that it must have been painful for God to make this transition. After all, wouldn't Donald Trump be pained to move from his 5th Ave. penthouse in New York, to homelessness in Harlem, and wouldn't Bill Gates be pained to move from his 30,000 square foot palace to destitution in a Dar Fur refugee camp. These of course are silly examples that don't come close to radical transition God made from heavenly splendor to the cold stone of our planet. Stripping himself of the sublime for the dirt of earth must have been a shock such as none of us can possibly imagine, and as St. Paul said, it was "...an incredibly humbling process."

I.

The Best Example:

The best story I've ever read to articulate just how painful it must have been for God to strip Himself of all His majesty originates from Korea

It was Christmas Eve in Korea sometime after the Korean War. An expectant mother walked through the snow to the home of a missionary friend where she knew she could find help. A short way down the road from the mission house was a deep gully spanned by a bridge. As the young woman stumbled forward, her birth pains overcame her, and she realized she could go no further.

She crawled under the bridge for shelter, and there alone between the trestles she gave birth to a baby boy. She had nothing with her except the heavy padded cloths she was wearing. So, one by one she removed the pieces of her clothing and wrapped them around her tiny newborn son... around and around like a cumbersome cocoon. Then finding a discarded piece of burlap, she pulled it over herself, and lay exhausted beside her baby.

The next morning the missionary drove across that same bridge in her jeep to take a Christmas basket to a Korean family. On the way back, as she neared the bridge, the Jeep sputtered and died, out of gas. Getting out, she started to walk across the bridge, when she heard a faint cry beneath her. She crawled under the bridge to investigate. There she found the tiny baby, warm but hungry, and the young mother frozen to death. The missionary took the baby home and cared for him, and eventually adopted him herself.

As the boy grew he often asked his adopted mother to tell him the story of how she had found him.

On Christmas Day, his 12th birthday, he asked the missionary to take him to his mother's grave. Once there he asked her to wait a distance while he went to pray. The boy stood beside the grave with bowed head, weeping. Then he began to disrobe. As the astonished missionary watched, the boy took off his warm clothing, piece by piece, and laid it on his mother's grave. "Surely he won't take off all of it," the missionary thought. He'll freeze! But the boy stripped himself of everything, putting all his warm clothing on the grave. He knelt naked and shivering in the snow. As the missionary went to help him dress again, she heard him cry out to the mother he never knew. "Were you colder than this for me, my mother? Where you colder than this?!" And he wept bitterly.

II.

It's Amazing...

In Christ God stripped Himself of everything and entered our cold me-centered world as an infant child, knowing that His end would be a horror of a death! He surrendered everything. As St. Paul expressed it, "He set aside the privileges of deity... and became human... becoming obedient even unto death."

Oh, how cold it must have been for God on earth. There was no room for Him at the Inn of Bethlehem... there was no cradle to welcome him... only rags to swaddle him and a feed box manger to hold Him. Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Lord God almighty had nothing to call home when he entered into our sin sick world. He quite literally went from the throne room of Glory to a crap stall in Bethlehem.

This Christmas Eve most of us will be safe and warm at home, celebrating festivities with family and friends sharing food, laughter, and song. But it was not so at that first Christmas! None of those involved in the birth of Christ were either at home, well fed, or secure. Joseph and Mary had to leave their home in Nazareth for Bethlehem. Mary left in disgrace as she was pregnant before her wedding day. And Joseph left with his family and friends all convinced he was a fool, a cuckold to a young girl whose pregnancy was not even his own. The Wise Men had left home months before to follow a star. Their journey took them through the desert wastes with hunger and thirst, threat and danger, uncertainty and anxiety their daily fare. They were required to endure much trouble and discomfort for the sake of their visitation. And so too were the shepherds required to leave their flocks, homes, and families to worship the Christ child. It's amazing

how far each of these individuals were willing to go for the sake of this newborn child. But no one traveled further or harder than God Himself, who traversed the infinity of the cosmos and somehow squeezed all of Himself... all of heaven's radiance into a seven pound baby. Pain does not begin to describe what God must have experienced at His birth. Indeed, it's amazing how far God was willing to go for the sake of you and me. Mothers rightfully talk of how painful their childbearing was, as their skin and bone were stretched beyond belief. But such pain is nothing compared to what God must have experienced as he squeezed Himself through a birth canal. This is a message of Christmas that tends to get overlooked, but one we may not be inoculated to. We are familiar with the quaint story of Mary and Joseph walking their way to Bethlehem, and how there was no room for them at the inn, and how they found shelter in a barn. But we are much less familiar and sensitive to God's own journey to Bethlehem. Not only the glory that He left behind, but the cold reception that He received immediately following His birth. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that no sooner was Jesus born than King Herrod sent his army to kill Him. This kind of hostility followed Him all his earthly life. As an adult He would preach good news to the poor and yet He would be accused of being a fraud. He would heal the sick and blind and yet his opponents would accuse Him of breaking the Mosaic Law. He would cast out demons and raise the dead and for this He would be accused of being a devil. But through it all His response to anger was patience; His reaction to doubt was faith, and His reply to the cold hearted realities of earth was the love of heaven.

Of course the obvious question is 'Why would God put up with this?' After giving up the brilliance of heaven, why would He bother to put up with the stupidity of mankind? There is, of course only, one possible answer.

Stephanie and I are friends with a couple (Curtis and Rachel Mulder) who shocked us with a bit of news several months ago. They are parents of two beautiful girls ages 9 & 7, and they had presumed that their baby making days were over. But Rachel's brother and sister in law had been unable to have a baby, and somehow it came to pass that Rachel volunteered to serve as their surrogate birth mother. Into Rachel's uterus was planted the fertilized egg of her brother and sister-in-law, and she is now carrying it to term! For those of you who have yet to have a baby, you have no idea just how big of a commitment this is, and frankly neither will Rachel's brother and sister in law. They will never fully comprehend the gift. After all, they won't be there when Rachel is sick in the morning, or when her hormones rage and she snarls at Curtis, or when she's too tired to play with her own children, or can no longer sleep comfortably, or when she goes into the

delivery room to face the worst pain imaginable, or when her body doesn't return back to the shape that it was before this pregnancy. The brother and sister in law can't possibly grasp the enormity of Rachel's gift. So why would Rachel put up with all this? There is only one possible answer.

It's amazing how far some are willing to go for the sake of love! But this is nothing... NOTHING compared with what God did that very first Christmas when love inspired Him to traverse the great chasm that spans between heaven and earth. Evidently no distance, circumstance, or power could keep God from making this painful passage from heaven's brilliance to Bethlehem's barn. St. Paul expressed it best when he wrote:

“For I am sure than neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus.”

III.

A Second and Third Passage!

And as if this journey from heaven to earth wasn't painful enough, God went still further! Indeed, Jesus' birth was just the beginning! You see the scripture tells us that 33 years after His birth into the world God was arrested, tried convicted, tortured and crucified on a cross after which He made a second painful passage... one that was probably even more painful than His first. For in His second passage God made the journey from earth to hell. How does the Apostle's Creed (which we recited earlier) put it?

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus Christ His only son our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of the Virgin Mary. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, HE DESCENDED INTO HELL...”

In other words our ancient Byzantine creeds confirm what St. Peter himself says in the scripture, that Jesus descended into hell after His crucifixion, and for three days He preached the Gospel of unconditional love to those condemned. It is amazing how far God has been willing to go for the sake of those He loves!

And as if this weren't enough, there is yet another passage that God wants to make. This one may not be as painful, but then again it may be more difficult. For you see God wants nothing more than to make the passage into your heart... to take up residence inside of you... to incarnate Himself at the very center of your life! This, after all, is why He came into our world in the first place. It wasn't to teach us, inspire us, or perform miracles. It was to take up residence in us so that we might rise above ourselves and reflect His glory in all that we do, say, feel and think. God wants to make the journey into your heart, and of course the question is whether or not you will let Him in. There wasn't any room for Him at the Inn of Bethlehem; so the obvious question is whether there is any room for Him in your heart? When He makes the journey to knock on the door of your heart, will you open your door?

IV. Harold:

Here, I am reminded of the story of young Harold, and how he brought the Christmas Spirit to the little town of Cornwell, New York.

It was the biggest event of the year in Cornwall... the annual Christmas pageant. Every parent in town wanted their son or daughter to have a part. On audition day, it didn't take long to match every part with just the right person. But then there was Harold. Because of his learning disabilities, the director gave him a simple part – the innkeeper who comes to the door and tells Mary and Joseph that there is not room for them. It was a part with only one line to learn.

On the night of the pageant, you had to arrive early just to get a seat. Backstage, the shepherds were putting on their bathrobes, the angels were adjusting their haloes, and everyone was reviewing their lines. The director was going over Harold's line with him... "One more time Harold, just say, 'I'm sorry, we have no room.'" Slowly, but surely, Harold repeated his line.

As Act One neared its end, a weary Mary and Joseph trudged up to the inn door, desperately looking for shelter. Joseph knocked on the door. Nothing happened. The front rows could hear the director whispering backstage, "Now, Harold!" As Harold opened the door, he listened to Joseph begging for a room for his pregnant wife.

Harold said nothing. Again, the director whispered, "I'm sorry, we have no room." Another long pause occurred before Harold struggled through his line – obviously conflicted; "I'm sorry... we have no room." Then slowly he closed the door. As Mary and Joseph began to turn away, Harold again struggled to get the door open. Before the stunned director

could stop him, Harold opened the door and ran after Mary and Joseph. Harold then shouted in a loud, pleading voice “Wait! Wait! You can have my room.”

Despite the director’s best preparations things didn’t go according to plan for the Cornwall Christmas Pageant, and yet young Harold captured an important meaning of Christmas. For instinctively Harold knew that when Jesus knocks, you’ve got to make room for Him in your heart.

2000 years ago, God made the painful journey from heaven to earth so that we could see and hear Him personally. Thirty three years later He made the passage from earth to hell so that He could give grace and liberty to those who were captive. And ever since He has been making the passage to sin sick hearts just like yours and mine for the sake of taking up permanent residence and lifting us to glory. Like I’ve been saying, it’s just amazing how far God is willing to go for your sake and for mine.

O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
Christ, The Lord! Amen.