



September 30, 2018

Incarnation: God Comes in Jesus
Pastor Vern Christopherson

John 1:1-14: 3:16-17

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

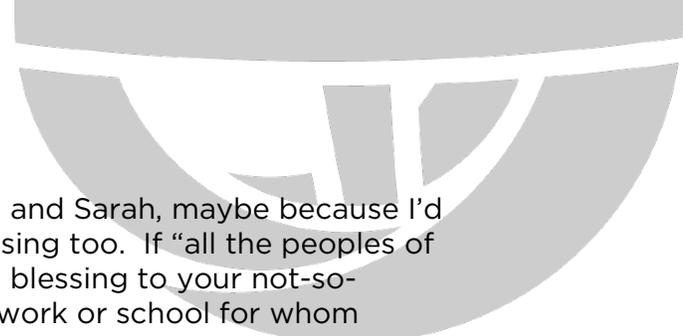
¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

We left off last week with the story of Israel. God called Abraham and Sarah, promising to give them a new land and descendants as many as the stars in the sky. As they left home and family behind, Abraham and Sarah had to learn to trust God every step of the way. As part of the promise, they came to believe that God had a job for them: "I want to bless you," God said, "so you can be a blessing to others. I want to be in relationship with all the peoples of the earth. I want you to help make that happen."



I've always resonated with these words to Abraham and Sarah, maybe because I'd like to believe that God wants to use us to be a blessing too. If "all the peoples of the earth" sounds a bit too lofty, how about being a blessing to your not-so-friendly neighbor down the street, or the person at work or school for whom English is a second language, or someone with whom you disagree politically?

So, how did being a blessing go for Israel? Sometimes pretty well. Joseph in Egypt interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. Seven fat cows were going to be swallowed up by seven skinny cows. A famine was coming. Seven years long. They needed to get ready.

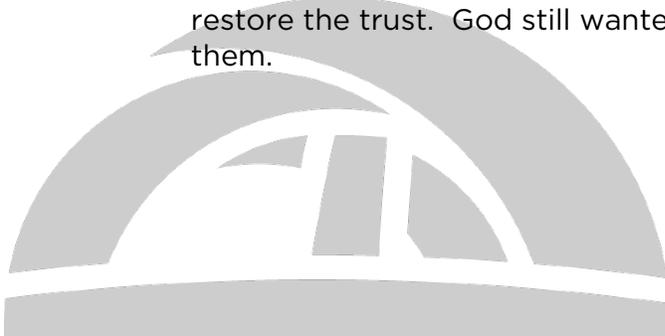
At other times, though, the blessing did not go well at all. Jonah stubbornly refused to go to the Ninevites and warn them of God's judgment. Plain and simple, Jonah hated them. They were Israel's sworn enemies. He said he would rather die than have the Ninevites repent and turn to God for mercy. God got the last word, though. Jonah *did* end up going to Nineveh, after spending a few days in the belly of a great big fish. The Ninevites *did* repent. And disaster *was* averted. As it turns out, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is an equal opportunity blessing, and God can use anyone – people like you and me – to share that blessing.

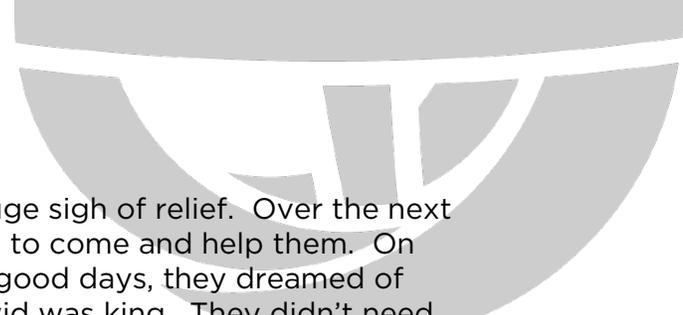
A couple ideas stand out for me in the Old Testament stories: 1) God rarely gives up on people, even when they make a mess of things. Adam and Eve get clothed by God, even as they're being kicked out of the garden. 2) God wants to be in relationship with people. God wants them to learn to trust and will go to almost any lengths to make that happen. When God hears the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush. God remembers the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God promises to give them the land and to make of them a great nation. God wants to bless them, not simply for their own sake, however, but for the sake of the whole world.

Israel's trust was severely put to the test toward the end of the Old Testament. They were stuck in exile in Babylon. They had turned their backs on God one too many times. As the months turned into years, things looked increasingly bleak. Was the relationship over? Could they still trust Yahweh? Would they ever have a chance to be a blessing again?

During the darkest days in Babylon, God sent prophets to proclaim words of hope. A prophet in the line of Isaiah said: *This is not the end of the story. God will do a new thing.* Jeremiah picked up this theme. He envisioned a new covenant, not one written on tablets of stone but rather on human hearts. There were even whispers of a new king, a messiah, one who would come and save them.

Clearly, God had not given up on Israel. And God's promises to them had not failed. But God had to improvise. God sent King Cyrus of Persia to the rescue. As with clothing for Adam and Eve, God reached out to renew the relationship and restore the trust. God still wanted to love and bless the whole world through them.





Eventually Israel made it home. They breathed a huge sigh of relief. Over the next five hundred years, they waited and prayed for God to come and help them. On their bad days, they hung on for dear life. On their good days, they dreamed of being a great nation again, like they were when David was king. They didn't need to be the strongest and most powerful nation, but they did want to be the blessing to the world that God had called them to be.

One day a rabbi named Jesus arrived in Galilee. Nobody had heard much about him, but soon this rabbi was calling disciples. He preached to anyone who would listen about a new kingdom that was coming, a new thing God was doing, a new covenant written on human hearts. Jesus used his disciples to reach out to the hungry and hurting. Much like Israel of old, he loved and blessed his disciples so they could be a blessing to others.

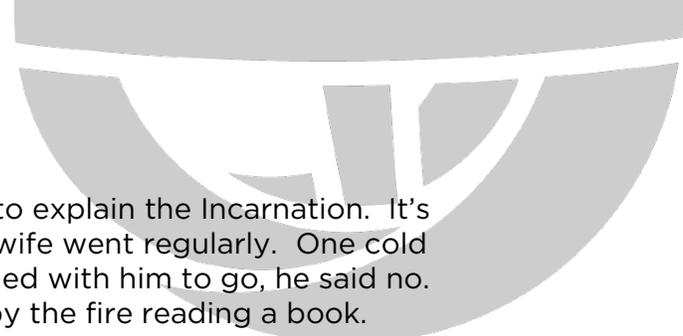
Tragically, the movement begun by Jesus was over almost as soon as it began. The rabbi was perceived to be a threat to the religious and political establishment. He ended up nailed to a cross. It served as a warning to all would-be messiahs who dared to challenge the status quo.

The cross was the end of the story, or so it seemed. It was a terribly sad day. But then the rumors began. Some women had gone to the tomb and claimed to have found it empty. His disciples checked it out for themselves, and before long they were actively working to keep his story alive. They shared it with others. As time went on, they began to ask: Who was this man from Galilee – really? Where did he come from? Was he the one we'd waiting for all these years?

Confessions of faith, which would someday be books of the Bible, were written to help people make sense of things. Those confessions that focused on Jesus' life and teachings were called gospels. They told stories of good news about Jesus the rabbi and the people who followed him. Because there were so many questions about Jesus, the gospel writers went looking for stories to help fill in the blanks. A man named Luke went all the way back to Jesus' birth in a cattle shed, and a visit from shepherds, and a choir of angels. He talked about Jesus growing up, and developing in wisdom and stature. In short, Luke emphasized Jesus' humanity. Jesus sounded like a lot of young people in his day, except that people sometimes called him *Savior* and *Messiah* and even *Son of God*.

A man named John also wrote a gospel. John went further back than Luke. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John spoke of Incarnation. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." As John penned his thoughts, I can only imagine how they sounded to his readers: "God in human flesh! Unheard of! Unthinkable! Wow!" In a culture in which Greek gods were often described as unfeeling and uncaring, here was a God who became one of us, a God who might know us even better than we know ourselves.





There's a modern-day story that's sometimes used to explain the Incarnation. It's about a farmer who never went to church, while his wife went regularly. One cold and blustery Christmas Eve, after his wife had pleaded with him to go, he said no. He was staying home. He was sitting comfortably by the fire reading a book. Suddenly he heard a thud against the windows of the house. He looked out and saw sparrows. They were trying to get in out of the cold and were attracted to the light. They kept crashing into the windows. The man closed the curtains, but it didn't help. So he put on his coat and hat and gloves, and went outside. He opened the barn doors, hoping the birds would find sanctuary there. That didn't help either. He turned on the lights in the barn and even spread a trail of cracker crumbs leading inside. Still no help. The frustrated farmer was ready to give up. He said with a sigh, "If only I could become a sparrow, I could communicate with them and lead them into the safety of the barn." The moment the farmer said those words, he finally understood what Christmas is all about - God becoming one of us so God could communicate with us and lead us to safety.

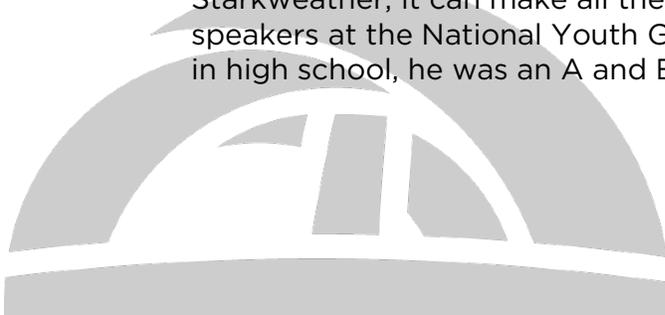
This story is only an analogy, of course. There's no way that John could prove who Jesus was and how he came to be. My hunch is that some of John's readers were able to accept the Incarnation at face value, while others were not. I mean, it's a lot different to call Jesus *Son of God* than to call him *God*. A couple centuries later, the early Christians were still trying to make sense of it. Was Jesus a man? Was he God? Or some combination of both?

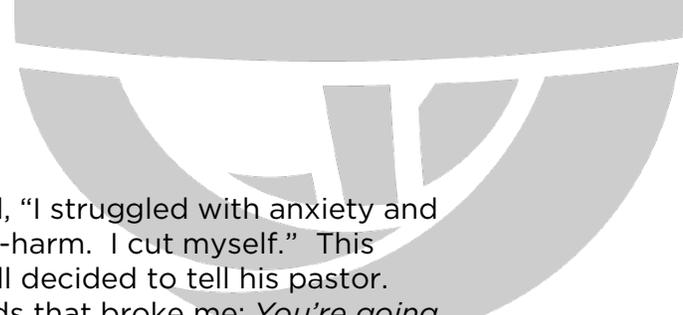
If you think last Friday's hearing involving Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh was complicated, it probably pales in comparison to two centuries of bitter and acrimonious dispute among the early Christians. A guy named Arius claimed that Jesus wasn't equal to the Father, but instead was a lesser god, one actually created by the Father. A guy named Marcion claimed Jesus wasn't really human, but only appeared to be so. After all, no self-respecting God would want to get mixed up in all the messiness of humanity. Much like last Friday, I can picture Arius and Marcion claiming to be 100% sure of their beliefs, even as their opponents were claiming to be 100% sure of theirs.

It took a long time, but eventually the church came to a decision: Arius and Marcion were wrong. *Jesus was fully human and fully divine*. Please know: there are hints of both in the Bible, but this is not something we can prove. We either choose to believe it or we don't. A lot is at stake either way: If Jesus was not fully God, then we are relying on promises that seem a little less secure. If Jesus was not fully human, then he's not as likely to understand our all-too-human story.

A verse from Hebrews 4 speaks to this: "We do not have a high priest" - meaning Jesus - "who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

So how important is this? How much does it matter for the Word to become flesh and dwell among us, full of grace and truth? According to Will Starkweather, it can make all the difference in the world. Will was one of the speakers at the National Youth Gathering in Houston. He shared that when he was in high school, he was an A and B student. He had lots of friends, sang in the choir,





was involved in sports. “I also had a secret,” he said, “I struggled with anxiety and depression. When I felt stress, I often turned to self-harm. I cut myself.” This pattern went on for months and years. One day Will decided to tell his pastor. According to Will, “My pastor shared four little words that broke me: *You’re going to hell.*” Will was devastated: “Those words confirmed all my guilt and shame. I was broken. There was no hope of fixing me.”

Will dropped out of college. He quit going to church. He sank into a deep depression. He tried everything he could think of to get his life back in order, but nothing worked. And he continued to cut himself.

Finally, Will found his way to a new church. He joined a praise band. After several months, he got up the courage to talk to his new pastor. “I was terrified,” he said. “Then the pastor shared four little words that changed my life.” After Will had poured out his heart, the pastor said, *There’s grace for that.*” For the first time in a very long while, Will felt hopeful. He went on to get treatment. He worked on accepting himself. This past Easter, he celebrated 10 years of being safe from self-harm. Will ended his talk: “We’re all recovering from something. We’re all broken. And there’s grace for that.”

That grace is at the heart of Christ’s Incarnation. We may not fully understand it, but we are invited to trust God every step of the way. God wants to be in a relationship with us. The Incarnation is God’s promise that God will always love us. No matter where we go, God will come after us. No matter what happens in life, God will never let us go.

Why is this so important? I think you know. Because God is a God of love and grace *for us* too. And because God wants to use us – just like Abraham and Sarah, like Joseph and Jonah, like the disciples and Will Starkweather – to love and bless the whole world. Amen.

