

The Present Christ

John 1:14

Rev. Brian Bill

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Pastors are known for working on their sermons in various locations. On Monday morning, we took one of our cars to the dealer for some warranty work. As Beth was driving me back home so I could take our other car in for new tires at Costco, we were on the phone with one of our daughters. She asked me what I was going to do while I was waiting for the tires. I told her that I had a fork in my pocket so I could buy a rotisserie chicken and sit at one of the tables and eat the whole thing.

Beth was mortified at the thought of me scarfing down an entire chicken in the Food Court and asked if I really had a fork in my pocket. My daughter didn't seem surprised that I might do this. Neither of them knew I was joking. It was one of my finer moments. Instead of consuming an entire chicken, I spent \$1.50 on a hot dog and a Coke Zero and worked on the sermon.

I've also been known to work on my sermons at coffee shops, at McDonald's, or at the library (I ended up at all three on Monday). I also work on my sermon at home and in my office at church. On occasion, I find a classroom on the lower level so I can work without distractions. I prioritize this time so I can be present with God, while still being present with people, so I can preach the glory of our ever-present God.

One pastor described what happened when he searched for a quiet place in his church to do some Christmas sermon prep.

The last place I expected graffiti was on the [back of a classroom] door of our church...etched in the brown door at eye level, were three words: GOD WAS HERE. Obviously an innocent gag, probably written by one of the creative teenagers with whom I worked.

A week later I returned to my place of quiet [and] noticed that the graffiti had been tampered [with]...someone had crossed out "was" and wrote "is" above it. In a quiet room, the message of Christmas is not GOD WAS HERE, but GOD IS HERE.

It was the message that the angels announced, that the shepherds heard, that the wise men sought, that Herod feared, that the world did

not even notice. It was the message that Mary cradled and that Joseph admired. It was the message wrapped in cloths. It was the little baby Jesus.

Jesus, God's one and only Son, became a man. He was God in a suit of flesh. He was the visible expression of the invisible deity... God was getting up close and personal [and] announcing to the world: "I'M HERE!"

While the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, the Gospel of John provides us with the back-story, or the theology behind the nativity. John 1:14 is startling in its simplicity but also incredibly deep: ***"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."***

Two Christmas Eves ago, I preached from this text and focused on the word "glory." We summarized the sermon this way: *The story of Christmas is all about the return of God's glory.* I remember thinking I wanted to come back to this verse and dwell on the depth of the word "dwell." That's what we'll do today. Here's our main idea: *At the birth of Jesus, God came to dwell with us; through the new birth, He comes to dwell within us.*

Sinclair Ferguson writes: *"The greatest threat to Christmas isn't secularism or consumerism but our own boredom with the most thrilling story ever told."* Let's walk through this verse phrase-by-phrase to help us "Behold the Wonder." I'm going to borrow a four-word outline from a pastor friend.

1. Incarnation. The entire superstructure of Christianity rests on this phrase from the first part of John 1:14: ***"And the Word became flesh..."*** This is Christmas in one breathtaking sentence. He who is larger than the universe became an embryo and He who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon a young mother. The infinite God took on the form of a tiny unborn baby. Jesus became a man without ceasing to be God. He added humanity but did not subtract deity. As someone put it, *"Jesus was God with skin on."*

The eternal Word did not merely appear in a body; He ***"became flesh."*** He became what He was not before, without ceasing to be what He has always been. By means of the virgin birth, Jesus entered the world guiltless of the sin of Adam. Since He was born of Mary, He is truly human; because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, He is free from inherited sin handed down from Adam. Jesus is both

ordinary and as Immanuel, He is extraordinary. He is Son and Savior, holy and human, fully God and fully man. Because He is God with us, He forbears with us. And because He is God for us, He forgives us.

When Jesus entered the world the verb tense changed from past to present, from “was” to “is.” He is here. He identifies with our pain, feels our hurt, and weeps with us. When Jesus became a man, He showed that God was not merely a principle but a person. Jesus became one of us to make God touchable, approachable, and reachable.

God isn't a detached, distant, or disinterested deity. He sent His Son who entered our world of sin, suffering, evil, and pain. He took the worst of it for me and for you. He came to our world as Son of David, Son of Mary, and Son of God, He died as our substitute Lamb of God, was raised to life as victor, ascended to Heaven as the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah, and is coming again in glorious triumph as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

During World War II, a Dutch Christian woman named Corrie ten Boom was imprisoned by the Nazis for hiding Jews in her home. One Christmas Eve, Corrie and her sister Betsie were packed into a barracks at Ravensbrück concentration camp. They were cold, starving, sick, and surrounded by death when someone quietly began reciting words she had memorized as a child: “***In the beginning was the Word...***” Soon others joined in, whispering Scripture from memory. After quoting verse 14, they stopped in awe and wonder: “***And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.***”

That night, in a Nazi prison camp, Corrie realized something she had never seen so clearly before:

Jesus was not far away.
He had not abandoned them.
He was *there with them*.

Later Corrie would write, “*There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still.*”

At the birth of Jesus, God came to dwell with us; through the new birth, He comes to dwell within us.

2. Habitation. We'll spend most of our time on the second phrase of John 1:14: **"...and dwelt among us..."** The word **"dwelt"** refers *"to pitching one's tent."* More specifically it means, *"to settle down, to stay, to inhabit."* In the Old Testament, it denotes the idea of *"residence."* Perhaps you've heard the word *shekinah glory*, which refers to God's dwelling presence.

John used a specific word which would make those with a Jewish background remember the **"tent of meeting,"** where God met with the Israelites in the desert. Interestingly, **"dwelt"** is the same word used for **"tabernacle"** or **"sanctuary."**

According to Exodus 25:8, God gave these instructions to Moses, **"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst."** Leviticus 26:11-12 says, **"I will make my dwelling among you...I will walk among you and will be your God."** 440 years later, after Solomon finished constructing the temple to be a more permanent dwelling place, God reiterated the promise of His presence in 1 Kings 6:13: **"And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel."**

I like how one pastor captured it:

"In the Old Testament, God's glory dwelt in a tent in the wilderness, and then in Solomon's gold-covered temple. God's presence was real, but veiled, separated by thick curtains, courts and sacrifices. Because sinful people cannot survive the white-hot holiness of God, God dwelt with people at a distance."

Even though God revealed His presence in unmistakable and powerful ways, His people gradually began to take His glory for granted. What was once sacred became familiar, and familiarity bred neglect. When God's people turned to idol worship, they were sent into exile. A building which once seemed permanent, standing for nearly 350 years, was reduced to rubble. When the Temple was destroyed, God no longer dwelt among them in a visible, physical place, and the radiant display of His glory faded into a distant memory. The silence was deafening. The absence was palpable.

Things looked bleak as people waited for a demonstration of God's promise to reside with His people. They longed for Him to come and dwell with them as they ached for the Almighty to appear. Isaiah 64:1 captures the raw plaintive plea of the people as they lamented this loss: **"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and**

come down!” One of our carols captures this sense of longing and expectation, “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel...”

After four long centuries of silence from the heavens, God put on an explosive exhibition of sight and sound, this time to lowly shepherds. Listen to Luke 2:9 in a fresh way: *“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the **glory of the Lord** shone around them [think of a blinding luminous light like the pillar of fire], and they were filled with great fear.”*

Then, a whole arsenal of adoring angels broke through the heavens and proclaimed that God’s glorious presence had returned in the birth of a baby! Listen for the word “glory” in verse 14: *“**GLORY TO GOD** in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”* God’s glory had returned to physically dwell with people again!

One paraphrase of John 1:14 puts it like this: *“Jesus came and moved into our neighborhood.”* Or, as a pastor in the inner city put it, *“He lived in the ‘hood.’”* One translation says He *“made His dwelling among us.”*

Someone said it like this:

“But on the first Christmas, everything changed. The glory didn’t stay behind the curtain anymore. The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. He got sawdust in his hair in a carpenter’s shop. He felt the Galilean sun on his back. He laughed at weddings, wept at gravesides, touched lepers, and washed dirty feet.”

And, if he were here today, He’d eat a hot dog at Costco.

Let me say it as clearly as I know how: In a much deeper way than when God dwelt with His people in the tabernacle and in the temple, He now dwells with people through His only Son Jesus Christ! In Him, the glory of God has descended, and He has pitched His tent to dwell among us and with us. God’s good news comes into our bad news. Centuries of waiting are now over.

He now dwells with us, and will dwell in us, when we decide to believe and receive. *At the birth of Jesus, God came to dwell with us; through the new birth, He comes to dwell within us.* Once He comes in, He will dwell with us forever, never to depart.

A week ago, I read Revelation 21:3 to David Hoy, the board chairman of Keep Believing Ministries, as he was preparing to leave this life and head to eternity. When I finished, he whispered “Amen” softly but confidently: *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’”* BTW, we’re beginning a new series called “Revelation Unveiled” on the weekend of January 3-4.

3. Manifestation. Amazingly, John was able to gaze upon the glory of Jesus: *“...and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father...”* When John said, *“we have seen,”* he used a word that means, *“to gaze intently upon, to study as in a laboratory.”* As an eyewitness, John spent three years with Jesus, seeing His glory on display. This was especially evident at the Transfiguration. When Jesus turned water into wine, John 2:11 tells us that He *“manifested His glory. And His disciples believed in Him.”*

Don’t miss this! God’s presence was previously tied to a place but now it’s wrapped up in a person named Jesus.

4. Invitation. This impactful verse ends with a very powerful invitation. We’re told that when Jesus dwelt on earth He was *“...full of grace and truth.”* The word *“full”* means, *“abounding or complete.”* *“Grace”* refers to a favor done without expectation of return and *“truth”* has the idea of factual, pure, sincere, and without error. One paraphrase captures it like this: *“Jesus was generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”*

Grace and truth are two concepts that don’t often appear together. As humans we tend to err on one side or the other. If we stress grace, we can be too quick to let something slide. If we pull the truth trigger too quickly, we can wipe someone out. Grace without truth can lead to sloppy sentimentality and truth without grace can lead to religious rigidity.

With Jesus you can always count on both truth and grace. He tells the truth about your situation and your sins, and then His grace causes Him to stick with you all the way.

An example of Jesus as full of grace and truth is when He interacted with the woman caught in adultery. In John 8:11, Jesus did not condemn her (“neither do I condemn you”), but He also upheld the importance of holiness by telling her the truth (“go and sin no more.”)

Because He is full of grace, you can come to Him just as you are, without having to clean up your act first. You don't need to do endless acts of penance or focus on performing a long list of good deeds for Him. Because He is full of truth, you can come in complete confidence that He will keep His promise to forgive you and grant you eternal life.

That's grace and that's truth. Without both working together, we would have neither.

At Christmas, we see Jesus as 100% God and 100% man. Jesus became what He had never been before without losing what He had always been. Because He is God, He is sovereign. Because He is man, He can be our substitute by taking our place of punishment on the cross.

God the Father is just and therefore demands payment for our sins and because He is a God of grace, He provided the Savior, who shed His blood as full payment for our sins. He is just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Him. God's ultimate answer to sin and suffering isn't an explanation; it's the incarnation!

Harry Ironside often told a story about Czar Nicholas I of Russia, whose friend asked him to employ his son as paymaster for an army barracks. The young man, however, gambled away most of the funds entrusted to him. Facing an upcoming audit, he calculated his massive debt and realized he could never repay it. Seeing no other option, he decided to commit suicide at midnight. He wrote a confession spelling out what he'd stolen, adding these words at the bottom of the page: "*A great debt. Who can pay?*" Exhausted, he fell asleep at his desk.

That night, the czar made a surprise visit, saw the light, and read the young man's confession. After a pause, he wrote one word on the bottom of the paper and left.

When the man woke up, he realized it was past midnight and grabbed his gun. But then he saw one word below his question: "*Nicholas.*" Realizing the czar knew everything yet had signed his name with a promise to cover the debt, he fell into peaceful sleep. The next morning, a messenger delivered the exact amount owed. Only the czar could pay such an enormous debt.

In the same way, only Jesus could pay our enormous debt of sin against a holy God. Like the young man, we must face our sins and cry out, "*A great debt. Who can pay?*" Jesus steps forward and signs our ledger: "*Jesus!*" Only He could pay

our debt.

Ponder this thought: The INNOCENT was punished as if guilty, that the guilty might be rewarded as if INNOCENT. We truly deserve the penalty and punishment, but God has poured out His wrath against sin on His own Son. Even more, He took our rottenness and in exchange, gave us His righteousness.

Ray Pritchard writes:

“We sometimes hear that Christmas proves how important we are to God. After all, He sent his Son to save us. That’s true, but it’s not the whole story. Christmas proves how messed up we are. Jesus didn’t come for perfect people because perfect people don’t need a Savior. If you don’t see yourself as a sinner, then Christmas is just another holiday. But if you are willing to admit that you are lost, then you can be found. Christmas is for broken people who aren’t ashamed to admit it. The self-righteous need not apply. They missed Jesus when He came the first time, and they still miss Him today.”

Jesus lived among us that He might die for us. The God who once dwelt in a tent in the desert, now chooses to make His home in people who repent, believe, and receive Him as Lord and Savior.

Apart from Christ, we would never fully know the depths to which we are loved or the lengths to which God can be trusted. At the heart of the incarnation is an invitation. Because of grace, Jesus was born to die in your place. Will you trust in Him so you can live?

At the birth of Jesus, God came to dwell with us; through the new birth, He comes to dwell within us.

I don’t know how many Christmas presents you’ll receive this year, but there is one present you can’t live without. The one present you need is the presence of the ever-present Christ because He is the God who is here.

If you’re ready to receive and believe in Him as your sin substitute, would you bow your head and repeat this prayer silently?

Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept You out of my life. I confess that I am a sinner and fall way short of Your glory. I now recognize You and will no longer reject

You. By faith I gratefully receive Your gift of salvation. Thank You, King of Glory, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe and now I receive, so that I can be born again and become Your child. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and be my Savior. Help me to live my life to give You the glory You deserve. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

We're going to end with a time of candle lighting while we sing "Silent Night."

Silent night holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia.

Candle Lighting

Please find the switch on the bottom of your candle and turn it on. Let's stand and sing together.

Silent Night

Dismissal

Isaiah 60:1 says: "*Arise, shine for your light has come, and the **GLORY** of the Lord has risen upon you.*" Let's let God's glory reside within us and radiate from us as we go into a dark and dreary world.

As you leave the service today, do so reflectively. Please drop off your candles at the doors so we can use them for future services.

Thanks for coming. We hope you come again next weekend. We have some gift bags for our guests out in the lobbies.

Merry Christmas!