

Christ the Incarnate Son

John 1:14

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This week, I read an article from a pastor giving advice to fellow pastors about preparing their Christmas sermons: *“Dear partner in preaching, here’s a word of advice as you prepare your Christmas Eve sermon: keep it short, sweet, and simple.”* I’m going to aim for two out of three. I think I’ve managed to keep the message shorter (we’ll see how that goes), hopefully you’ll find the sermon to be sweet, but it will not be simple, or shallow, or superficial. I’ll do my best to explain some deep theological truth, and if you do your best to follow along, we’ll never look at Christmas the same way again.

Incidentally, while I was working on this sermon at a coffee shop, I ran into someone who has been watching online and another guy I’ve gotten to know. They asked me about the message I was preparing for Christmas Eve, so I sat down at their table and tried my best to explain what I was planning to preach on. When I was done, I was feeling pretty good about my sermon summary until one of them started frowning and said, *“That was all pretty confusing!”* I told them I needed to go back to the drawing board and invited them to come this weekend to see if I can make things any clearer.

My friend’s reaction motivated me to come up with a one-sentence summary of today’s sermon: *The story of Christmas is all about the return of God’s glory.*

Let’s begin by defining the word, **“glory.”**

1. Glory defined. The word **“glory”** literally means, *“Heavy in weight, important, significant, having a great reputation and splendor, brightness and beauty, worthiness and honor.”* God’s glory is the sum total of the weightiness of all His attributes. It has to do with the fame of His name and represents His presence and power.

God’s *Shekinah* glory is the transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning, *“the one who dwells.”* When the invisible God manifests His presence, He makes His glory visible in profound and powerful ways by descending to dwell among people.

When God made His glory known, He often did so through a thick cloud or by displaying the bright light of a fire as we see in Exodus 13:21: **“And the LORD**

went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.” God guided and guarded His people through His presence.

2. Glory displayed. According to Exodus 25:8, God instructed Moses, “*And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.*” This portable sanctuary was a tent where God’s *Shekinah* glory shone over the mercy seat between the two golden cherubim. Cherubim are winged angelic beings who protect and magnify the glory of God. Outside, above the holy place, was the manifested glory of the pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night, visible reminders that God was always present with His people while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Exodus 40:34-36 describes how God demonstrated His powerful presence with an unforgettable display of glory: “*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out.*”

440 years later, after Solomon finished constructing the temple, God reiterated His promise in 1 Kings 6:13: “*And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel.*” 1 Kings 8:10-11 adds: “*And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.*” This glory cloud had filled the tabernacle and now it filled the temple.

Unfortunately, even though God displayed His presence in a powerful way, God’s people began to take God’s glory for granted.

3. Glory departed. When the people became spiritually sloppy, they started sinning in big ways. Once, when they were losing a battle to the Philistines, they brought the Ark of the Covenant with them. This was a wooden box, covered with gold inside and out. This is where God was said to dwell (this is what Harrison Ford was searching for in “*Raiders of the Lost Ark*” and is totally different from Noah’s Ark). According to Numbers 4:15, only the high priest could touch the Ark. Since God won’t be treated like a good luck charm, He allowed the Ark to be captured by their enemies and 30,000 soldiers were slaughtered.

When Eli the priest was told his sons died in the battle and the Ark was in the hands of their enemies, he fell backwards, broke his neck, and died. When his daughter-in-law heard that her husband was dead and the Ark had been captured, she immediately went into labor and gave birth to a son, naming him Ichabod, and then she died. Listen to this sad summary in 1 Samuel 4:21: ***“And she named the child Ichabod, saying, ‘The glory has departed from Israel!’”*** She repeated this lament in verse 22: ***“The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”*** The name “Ichabod” literally means, “inglorious” or “there is no glory.” The display of God’s glory on earth had departed.

Many years after the Ark had been returned to Israel, and placed within the most holy place in the temple, a vivid description of the departing of God’s glory takes place in the Book of Ezekiel. While the glory of God filled the temple for about 350 years, because of people’s persistent sin and rebellion, God raised up the Babylonians, who wiped out Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

In vivid detail, we see how God’s glory departed slowly and reluctantly from the temple. God’s glory left in stages to show His grace, giving people an opportunity to repent and return to Him.

- Ezekiel 8:4 describes God’s glory enthroned over the Ark: ***“And behold the glory of the God of Israel was there...”***
- Then, God’s glory lifted from the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant and moved to the temple threshold according to Ezekiel 9:3: ***“Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house...”*** Ezekiel 10:4 adds more detail: ***“...and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the Lord.”***
- Sadly, God’s glory continued to withdraw, as the cherubim are seen hovering over the entrance in Ezekiel 10:18-19: ***“Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house...and they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the house of the Lord, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.”***
- After leaving the temple, God’s glory was seen standing on the Mount of Olives according to Ezekiel 11:23: ***“And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.”***

As a result, God was no longer dwelling with His people and the display of His glory on earth became a distant memory. After God’s glory departed from the

temple, there is no record of God's Shekinah glory returning when the next temple was built after the exile. In addition, even though Herod's temple was glorious, and took 46 years to build, there was no evidence of a visible display of God's glory within it either.

Things looked bleak as people waited for a display of God's glory to reappear. Isaiah 64:1 captures the plaintive plea of the people as they lamented the departed glory. This cry echoed across the centuries: ***"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!"*** One of our Christmas carols captures this sense of longing and expectation, *"O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel..."*

4. Glory descended. After centuries of silence, we see God once again exhibiting an explosion of sight and sound, this time to lowly shepherds. Listen to Luke 2:9: ***"And an angel [perhaps a cherub] of the Lord appeared to them, and the [wait for it...] 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 glory 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."*** These angels celebrated the return of God's glory to earth. God's glory had returned to dwell with people again!

We've moved from the bad news of *Ichabod's* lost glory to the good news of great glory brought by *Immanuel*.

The story of Christmas is all about the return of God's glory!

But wait, there's more. This celebration is in the superlative: ***"Glory to God in the highest,"*** which means the *"loftiest and most elevated."* God is at the highest level, the peak, the summit. He is the most beautiful, the brightest, and most brilliant. There is no one higher and nothing greater. Among the Jews, the ***"highest"*** is *Elyon*, the main name for God.

While the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, 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."***

The first phrase says the ***“Word became flesh...”*** This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. The miracle of Christmas is the infinite becoming an infant.

The whole superstructure of Christianity rests on this truth. Jesus is fully God and fully man. A theologian described it this way: *“...God must be able to come over to our side without leaving His own ‘side.’”* Astronaut James Erwin, who traveled to the moon, said this about Christmas, *“There’s something more important than man walking on the moon, and that is God, walking on the earth.”*

The next phrase, ***“...and dwelt among us...”*** refers *“to pitching one’s tent.”* More specifically it means, *“to settle, to stay, to inhabit.”* In the Old Testament, it denotes the idea of *“residence.”* One paraphrase puts it like this: *“Jesus came and moved into our neighborhood.”*

When we consider what ***“dwelt among us”*** means, we might be tempted to think that Jesus just came to hang out with us. But John used a specific word which would make those with a Jewish background remember the ***“tent of meeting,”*** where God met with the Israelites. Are you ready for this? This word ***“dwelt”*** is the same word used for ***“tabernacle.”***

In John 2:11, we read that when Jesus turned water into wine, He ***“manifested His glory.”*** In Luke 9:32, when Jesus was transfigured, the disciples ***“saw His glory.”*** Hebrews 1:3 says the Savior is the outshining Shekinah glory of God, ***“He is the radiance of the glory of God...”***

In John 2:14, the Jews were mystified and mad when Jesus said their beautiful temple would be destroyed and He would raise it in three days. I’m sure they were not expecting His answer: ***“But He was speaking about the temple of His body.”*** The body of Jesus is the new tabernacle and the new temple!

Now with all that as background, hear John 1:14 again as I read it slowly: ***“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us [listen to this next part] and we have seen His GLORY, GLORY as of the only Son from the Father...”***

Let me say it as clearly as I know how: *In a similar way that 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.

The story of Christmas is all about the return of God's glory!

Are you ready for some more spiritual goosebumps? On Palm Sunday, do you know where Jesus was before riding into Jerusalem? Right, He departed from the Mount of Olives, reversing the order of the departure of God's glory in Ezekiel! And as He rode the donkey, which fulfilled another prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9, the crowd broke out into a cacophony of praise according to Luke 19:38: ***"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and GLORY IN THE HIGHEST!"***

Do you know where Jesus went after arriving in Jerusalem? The King of Glory went into the temple! Do you know what He did when He got there? Verse 45 tells us *Immanuel* cleansed the temple because it had become *Ichabod*.

In Matthew 23:38, when Jesus looked at the temple, He lamented: ***"See your house is left to you desolate."*** This was the final judgment given to Israel by the King of Glory for their rejection of Him. The temple is left ***"desolate,"*** which means, *"abandoned to ruin"* because it had become *Ichabod*, devoid of God's glory.

As we look into the future, Ezekiel 43:1-5 describes what Jesus will do at His second coming when He enters the future temple: ***"Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory... and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple."***

God's glory has come back to stay!

5. Glory delivered. When Jesus returns, God's glory returns. Listen to Matthew 24:30: ***"Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and GREAT GLORY."*** When Jesus comes again, according to Zechariah 14:4, He will land and stand on the Mount of Olives before entering the east gate: ***"On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west..."***

Revelation 21:3: *“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.’”* According to verse 11, the new Jerusalem will come down from Heaven, *“having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel.”*

Drop down to Revelation 21:22-23: *“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”* Verse 27 adds that *“only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life”* can enter the city.

6. Glory discovered. Don’t miss this! God’s glory was previously tied to a place but now it’s wrapped up in a person named Jesus. And, when we put our faith in Him, His glory comes and resides within us. EBC attendee Bryan LaBerge passed along some great insight this week: *“The pillar of cloud and fire certainly paint a picture of the church at the day of Pentecost when the mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire stood above each believer.”*

In fact, 1 Corinthians 3:16 says the glory of God now dwells within His church and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says God’s glory dwells within individual Christians: *“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”* Just as the tabernacle was at the center of Israel’s camp, so Christ must be the center of our lives. Just as sacrifices for sin were offered at the tabernacle, so Jesus is our complete and final sacrifice, giving us unfettered access to the Almighty.

Let’s go back to John 1:14 because it ends with a powerful invitation: *“...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.

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.

At Christmas we're reminded that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. The manger is filled with the awesomeness of God's glory and grace, but we're also faced with truth: because of our sin, Jesus Christ came as our sin substitute. Romans 3:23 says, "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"

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 penance or focus on performing 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.*

Several years ago, I was given a bird feeder but hadn't put any birdseed in it for a long time. After a really frigid cold spell, I finally filled it up because I felt sorry for the birds. I told Megan, who was 17 at the time, that I was now officially old because I was bothered about the birds. She agreed with me. I'm probably old enough to start watching Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy as well.

Anyway, I filled it to the top, but no birds came for breakfast, for lunch or for dinner. They completely ignored it. This went on for two days. I was more worried than I should have been and wondered how I could get a message to the birds that there was free food for them. I thought about putting a sign up but wasn't sure that would work. The only way I could communicate with them was if I became a bird so I could tell them. I guess I'm not only getting old, but also losing my mind!

Listen. Jesus became one of us in order to get a message to us that He is the King of Glory who has come to dwell among us so we can dwell with Him forever.

One author said it like this: *“Christmas is the end of thinking you are better than someone else, because Christmas is telling you that you could never get to heaven on your own. God had to come to you.”*

Let me come back to the pastor who said to keep Christmas Eve sermons short, sweet, and simple. He also said these profound words: *“If you really want to keep it simple, you could probably reduce the Christmas message even further, picking up the two words of the angels’ message that capture the heart of the Christian message: ‘for you.’”*

If you’re ready to receive and believe Immanuel 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.” Remember, light represents His glory, and *the story of Christmas is all about the return of God’s glory!*

Check out these words from “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.
- Please stand so we can 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 again to our guests for coming. We hope you come again next weekend. We have some gift bags for you out in the lobbies.