

Taking Christmas into the New Year / COB / 01.03.16

Introduction

- † I had a totally different sermon prepared for today. Then on Christmas day, the last Christmas devotion came from Dallas Seminary. The author was one of my favorite theologians and professors, Michael Svigel. And it made such an impact on me, that I briefly considered coming in with it last Sunday, completely unprepared.
- That might have been a little too raw. But on Monday, I sat down and sketched out this sermon, based on that devotion. So it still is a little unpolished by my standards, but I trust God will bless you all the same.
- † Open up your Bible to John 1.14. If you are using the pew Bible, that is page #1197. The NASB reads: **And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.**
- As most of us know from our recent studies in the gospel of John, the Word is the eternal and divine Son of God. At Christmas, we celebrate what this verse says, that he became flesh and dwelt among us. The eternal and divine Son of God became mortal flesh, a human baby. We call this the incarnation, the single instance of true deity occupying human flesh. It is one of the greatest miracles recorded in the Bible! The Son of God came to be one of us.
 - Svigel wrote: “The message of Christmas is the message of the incarnation of Christ—fully God and fully man, two complete natures in one unique Person. C. S. Lewis called it ‘the Grand Miracle’ of Christianity. If you think that sounds a little heavy for a holiday of ribbons and wreaths, you’re right. But the problem isn’t with the doctrine ... it’s with the decorations.”
 - I think it is great to celebrate the coming of Christ, even if we get a little frilly about it. But we don’t want to forget the reason for the celebration.
- † On Christmas Eve, I talked about why this miracle, this event, gives us cause to hope and rejoice. We hope and rejoice, because we know the birth of Jesus is the coming of the Son of God to be God the Father’s chosen Davidic King and Messiah-savior, the one we call Christ, who would die for our sins on the cross so we could have spiritual life, forgiveness, and an eternal relationship with God. We rejoice and hope because we know who Jesus is.
- Svigel’s devotion also discussed who Jesus is, but instead of talking about his identity, Svigel discussed Christ’s character as it is revealed by Christmas. So today we will consider the character of Jesus as revealed by Christmas, and what it means for how we live in this new year. [quick prayer]

Christ Acted in Humility

- † Turn in your Bible to Philippians 2.3. It is in the New Testament. If you are having trouble finding it, you can use the table of contents to get to Philippians, then look for the big 2, then scroll down to the little 3. Our first point is that Christ acted in humility.
- We will read **Philippians 2.3-7 NET: Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the**

interests of others as well. You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature.

- † Christ demonstrated humility in his willingness to be like us. Think about it!
- There he was, completely divine as the Son of God. He was eternal in that he always had existed; he was transcendent in that he was outside of creation, beyond creation, indeed he was the creator of everything we know; he was so flawless that he had no weakness, no imperfection, no temptation even.
 - And he condescended to come to earth as a person, as a person facing death, as a person within the fallen world, as a person with weakness and temptation. Even a perfect person is quite a comedown from being God.
 - Think of how much humility it would take for you to be willing to become a slave or even a bug like an ant; yet the coming of Christ was even more humbling, beyond our comprehension.
 - In Heaven, Jesus was the all-powerful, all-knowing, Son of God, but he gave up that position of equality with God the Father to come be with us, by taking on human nature. And even then, he did not come in glory as the king, but as a little baby, born to a poor family, born in a barn!
- † That first Christmas, Jesus acted in humility. How can we follow his example? How can we put on the humility of Christ demonstrated in the incarnation?
- Look again at **Philippians 2.3-5 NET: Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well. You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had [toward you].**
 - These statements are all related. Jesus taught that you should love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. Take a look around; go ahead! look around! How much do you really know about the cares, the interests of these other people? I remember to pray for Wade's, Carol's, and Kevin's mothers, but I struggle to remember their names. I wonder how many of us care enough to pray even about the personal requests that arise among us.
 - I made a bold statement in the development class last week, that if someone in our congregation lost her house, I had no doubt five families would offer to take her in. Is that true? Would you give up your comfort, your routines, your money for someone else in our church? What if it wasn't someone you like much? You should be willing to contribute or pray when we put out a general distress signal. And for at least some others here, you should be seeking ways to be a blessing.
 - I said last week that if we do life and ministry together, there will be conflicts. Are you humble enough to defer to others, to allow them to win or try their idea first? Are you humble enough to forgive unconditionally even when there is no apology, to give unconditionally even when there is no thank you? Are you humble enough to make serving Christ the focus of your life, instead of always asking Christ to serve you like a supernatural Santa Claus? For a little church, we tend to rally well when someone needs a favor or a meal, but it is so hard to live like Paul described, like Jesus exemplified, day to day.

- I'll tell you the hardest part for me. I really do love all of you. And if you call me with a problem, I am willing to put your cares ahead of my own. But that is reactive, not proactive, not intentional. I have a to-do list at home and a to-do list at work, those are my cares day to day, and I get so immersed in them, in trying to fulfill what I consider to be my obligations, that I forget to look up from them, to really look at you, and ask, how could I serve you as a friend. I think this is a common problem. Whether we need to become more humble or just less self-absorbed, I pray God will change us to be more like Christ.
 - I used to have a friend named Helen. Before she died, Helen had a ministry to the homeless in Sarasota. She didn't have to do this. She was married to a fellow who made a good living, they were prominent in a church that offered plenty of opportunities. But Helen felt called to a ministry to the homeless. Primarily it was a hugging ministry. She helped feed them and clothe them and did other services for them, but every week she would be out among them, hugging them, holding their hands, even though they were dirty and diseased. She told me once that nobody would touch them willingly, so when she did, it showed them the love of Jesus.
- † Svigel summarizes: "The eternal Son of glory gave up His heavenly rights for us. We earthly humans can surrender our temporal rights for one another... Are you stubbornly holding on to your own ways? Like Christ, we must release our rights for the sake of others." [quick prayer]

Christ Selflessly Stepped Out of His Comfort Zone for His Mission

- † Turn in your Bible to Matthew 20.26. Our second point is that Christ selflessly stepped out of his comfort zone for his mission.
- **Matthew 20.26-28 NET:** [Jesus speaking] **"It must not be this way among you [that leaders exploit the people]! Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave— just as the Son of Man [Jesus] did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**
- † In Heaven before his birth, the Son of God was ruler of the universe, in the prime position at God the Father's right hand, he was, well, God! He left that comfortable position and all the glory and we might say comfort, to come be with us, so he could carry out his gospel mission.
- And while here, though he was the rightful heir to the throne, the Messiah-savior promised by God the Father in the prophets, and – indeed as the Son of God incarnate – truly the greatest teacher and prophet ever, to fulfill his mission he came as a baby, born to a poor family, born in a barn or cave; born as an apparently illegitimate child to a family that had to flee persecution as refugees; he bore the mockery of common people and religious leaders, and even his family.
 - And though he was a perfectly pure, sinless person, the true king and prophet, the Son of God in the flesh, Jesus ministered to sinful, flawed people. He touched them, allowed them to touch him, even when they had disgusting sores or contagious diseases. He dined in their houses and attended their parties, even though there would be drunken revelry, coarse language, prostitutes, people there who hated or doubted him. To fulfill his mission, he allowed friends to die, and then allowed others to cruelly torture him and kill him in the most painful and humiliating way they had in that culture.
- † That first Christmas, Jesus selflessly stepped out of his comfort zone to serve, particularly to pursue his gospel mission. How can we follow his example?

- **Look again at Matthew 20.26-27 NET: [Jesus says] “whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave.”**
- Within the church, are you willing to be a servant, even a slave for Christ? Are you willing to make serving Christ by serving others your goal in this church?
- Think about the church’s mission, the great commission. You can turn there, to **Matthew 28.18-20 NET: Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**
- This is the purpose for the church: to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ, baptize them properly into the church when they come to faith, and then teach them how to become mature reproducing disciples of Christ themselves.
- Those of you who are regulars remember we use a three circle diagram to show God’s hierarchy in each biblical time period. The one for the church age has God in the top circle, the church in the middle, and everyone else in the bottom circle. God is in the top circle, because he is in authority over everyone, particularly he is in authority over his people in the church. The church is in the second circle, with Christ as our head, because we are supposed to be God’s image bearers: we reflect God’s character to the rest of the world, we represent God to the rest of the world, we seek to rule as God’s stewards over creation, and we seek to reproduce God’s image in the people of the world.
- So Fulfilling the great commission is the primary way we represent God and reflect his character to the other people groups of the world: reproducing spiritually so that people in the bottom circle come to know God through Christ and thus join the middle circle with us.
- This thus is a purpose statement for every one of us who is supposed to live as the image bearer of God. So think about it. How often do you share the gospel, any part of the gospel? How intentional are you about building relationships with lost people, about living out Christ in relationship with them, about being their slave so that they see the reality of Christ in you?
- Are you intentional about growing yourself into a teacher and mentor in the church? If you are not ready to teach or mentor, then get taught and mentored until you are!
- And here, I think is the hardest part. Stepping out of our comfort zone for this gospel mission. I am sure any of us would be delighted to share what we know if someone would come up and kindly ask us, right? But are we willing to risk rejection by asking them? Are we willing to sacrifice some leisure time, some money, some pride to really serve our neighbors for Christ, talk with our coworkers about Christ? Are we willing to subject ourselves to ongoing training and accountability so we grow in our abilities to evangelize, teach, and mentor? When I pray, when I write sermons, when I sing songs, I am willing! But when I look at my day to day life, again I see self-absorption.
- I told you before about my friends Bob and Susan. They have been international missionaries, planted multiple successful churches overseas, headed up church ministries in the states, and now Bob is the national director of missions agency Launch Global and last year had his first book published. They can live comfortably in the suburbs of Birmingham, Alabama, where they are based, without anybody questioning their dedication. But last year, they moved into the inner city, so they could be near international students, refugees, recent immigrants, because they want to have more opportunity to share the gospel and lead people to Christ.

- † Svigel summarizes, “Because the divine Son stepped out of the comfort of heaven for us sinners, we should step out of our earthly comfort for the lost. We can’t wait for them to come to us. Like Christ, we must pursue them. Don’t be afraid to endure the darkness of the world to shine the light of Christ for others.” [quick prayer]

Christ Sacrificed for Others

- † Turn in your Bible to Luke 9.57. Our third point is that Christ sacrificed for others.
- **Luke 9.57-58 NET: As they were walking along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus said to him, “Foxes have dens and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”**
- † This is somewhat repetitive in theology, but not in application. Jesus gave up his Heavenly position of power and authority, his position of having everything at his command, and he not only came as a person, but as one who faced hardship.
- He was born in a barn on a winter night. He began life as an apparently illegitimate child. He grew up the son of a blue-collar worker, in a small and insignificant town. When he began his ministry, he had no home: he wandered the countryside, dependent on the charity of others. He was probably thin, hungry much of the time, bearded, with one outfit of simple clothing, not always very clean; he would have relieved himself in the bushes, and been aware that the local authorities were often against him.
 - As the Son of God in Heaven, everything belonged to him; as the Son of God even in human flesh, he surely could have had anything he wanted; but he remained focused on his mission, and so he sacrificed everything, including almost all material things, for others.
- † That first Christmas, Jesus chose to sacrifice to come for us. How can we follow his example?
- Svigel developed his point with regard to selfless giving versus selfish materialism. Since I want to talk a little this year about our attitudes toward money, it makes sense to follow Svigel’s lead here today.
 - When Jesus said, “**the Son of Man has no place to lay his head,**” it was a challenge in response to someone first saying to him, “**I will follow you wherever you go.**” Do you consider yourself a follower of Jesus? Are you willing to follow him even if that means poverty, homelessness, struggle? Are you willing to act on what we call the “top line” of faith and obedience if the Holy Spirit starts telling you to give it all away to those in need, or at least to buy only what can be used in serving Christ through blessing others, that you need to find a way to use your house, your vehicle, your video games to glorify God and bless others or you shouldn’t have them?
 - Are you willing to give up something, so you can give more to agencies that help the poor? Are you willing to budget less for entertainment or eating out, are you willing to spend less on your next vehicle or own fewer clothes, so you can give more to the church, so we can carry out the gospel mission?
 - I’ll tell you what is hard for me. When LeeAnn and I were first married, we gave up more than half our income so I could pursue ministry work. That meant almost never eating out, not fixing up our house, driving old cars. Even so, we felt we were not really giving sacrificially, since we still had a good house, two cars, enough to eat. Now LeeAnn makes more and I am working

again so we do give more: we give over 10% of our income to the church and about another 5% to charities, missionaries, and seminary students; yet we still are not sacrificing. We give a lot, but at the end of the day we are better off than ever. Now here is the thing. At Thanksgiving, I bought my cats a \$90 cat tower; they love it, so it was a good purchase in that sense; but I know in the back of my mind that money could have provided forty-five meals for the homeless. Even those of us who are not wealthy by American standards have been entrusted with some resources; how generous are you willing to be with yours? Are you willing to sacrifice to give?

- I knew a guy named Scott who was a successful business man. One day, the Spirit called him to downsize his house, so he could give more to the church. I knew a pastor named Brian, who loved fancy coffee drinks, and he did all his mentoring, most of his evangelism, and even much of his sermon writing inside Starbucks, but one day he declared he was switching from latte to tea, because that would mean an extra \$20 per week, \$1000 in a year, that he could give away.
- † Svigel summarizes, “Because God the Son gave up the benefits of infinite riches for us, we should give our earthly wealth for Him. When I do a quick inventory of the “stuff” I’ve accumulated in just the past year, I’m ashamed. How about you? Are you building yourself a little kingdom here on earth or investing in the Kingdom of Heaven? Don’t forget—the God of glory began His human life lying in a feeding trough and ended it nailed to a tree. Like Christ, we must surrender our riches for His kingdom.” [quick prayer]

Conclusion

- † Being humble, being willing to leave our comfort zone, being sacrificial: these are three things we can learn from the character of Christ as revealed by his arrival that first Christmas.
- At the end of his devotion, Svigel challenges us with this final thought: The verse that says, “‘The Word became flesh’ is the true heart of Christmas.” How much does your heart reflect the Christ we celebrate at Christmas? Let’s pray . . .