

Let me start by just saying Merry Christmas. Now, I know that might seem strange. About a week ago, you celebrated Christmas. You ripped open your presents and had all sorts of fun and food. But the reality is Christmas actually isn't over. Historically, the church calendar, what's known as the liturgical calendar, has been a way of organizing different areas and seasons of the Christian life. And what's interesting about this time on the church calendar is we're actually in a season called Christmastide, and Christmastide is not just a day.

Most of us are familiar with Christmas Day, but we race past Christmas. The church calendar actually teaches us is to slow down and not just celebrate Christmas in one day but rather spend 12 days celebrating Christmas. You know, in my office right now, there hangs a calendar which demonstrates the different seasons of the church. The church calendar is different from the agrarian calendar that you and I abide by—January through December. Rather than that calendar, which organizes time based on months, the church calendar organizes time-based on the different seasons of the Christian life.

So, the church calendar actually begins with Advent, which was about a month ago. Advent is all about waiting. It's about preparation for the arrival of the Incarnation of Jesus. It's about longing and tapping into all of that waiting for Jesus to arrive. We don't tend to think much about this calendar, but Advent, as it begins the church calendar, actually awakens us to the very story of Jesus. Advent rolls into what you and I are celebrating now, Christmastide, which is not just a day to celebrate the arrival of Jesus, but it's this season of the 12 days from Christmas morning to January 5.

I find it interesting that the church sets aside so much time to celebrate Christmas because you and I live in a culture that really isn't good at celebrating. We're pretty good at preparing. We're pretty good at anticipating, but generally, we arrive at a day like Christmas, and then we're ready to move on to the next one. We're ready to put away the decorations, take down the lights, put the tree back outside, and just move on.

So, for a few years, I've been really interested and drawn into this idea of the church calendar because it teaches us to understand time differently. We, as Christians, actually encounter time differently. We organize our years, weeks, and days differently. Think about things like daily prayer or daily quiet time, which organizes the way that you spend a 24-hour period. You anchor yourself in the scriptures and communion with God in prayer, and that's how you begin your day.

Think of the practice of Sabbath. Sabbath is a way in which we reorient the way we spend a week. We look at a week and set aside one day as the sort of anchor point of our relationship with the Lord throughout the week. Well, the church calendar, or what's known as the liturgical calendar, is another one of those practices that reorient how we spend a year.

Joan Chittister, in her great book called *The Liturgical Year*, wrote,

The way we define our years determines what we think our lives are meant to be about and how we live because of it. There are fiscal years and school years, planting periods and harvesting periods, calendar years, and business years. There are years to mark every stage of life—childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age, and old age. And all of those periods are unlike the periods before it. The question is, what kind of year means the most to us spiritually? What in the spiritual life is there to enable us to live all the other years well, to their fullness, to the elastic limits of our growing souls? Chittister

What Chittister is getting at is that throughout history, the very way the church has organized its year actually gives shape to our own formation. And so, for us, that begins in Advent. Advent, the four weeks leading to Christmas, rolls into Christmastide, which is a 12-day period where we celebrate the birth and the arrival of Jesus.

Then that rolls into a season from January to mid-February called Ordinary time, where it's just the ordinariness of life that gives way to Lent, which is the 40 days prior to Easter. And then, of course, we arrive

at Easter, the great ceremony of the Christian faith, the biggest of all the festivals for the Christian.

Easter gives way to a long period of ordinary time, where we're just going about our lives, awaiting that new year to begin. You see, this rhythm, when we pay attention to it, actually has a way of teaching us the Christian story year over year, time after time. As these seasons and events pass, as we enter into them walking through them, they help us to understand the Christian story and, in some ways, get it into our very bones. Chittister goes on a little later in her book and writes,

The liturgical year is an adventure in bringing the Christian life to fullness, the heart to alert, and the soul to focus. It does not concern itself with the questions of how to make a living. It concerns itself with the questions of how to make a life.
Chittister

I really like that because you and I can get so caught up in racing through the holidays. As things begin to pick up speed, we're just going from one thing to the next. But the church calendar, and particularly this season of Christmastide, teaches us to slow down, to be able to enter into something as mysterious as the birth and the arrival, the Incarnation of Jesus. And that when we slow down, we actually allow that to sit in our bones a little bit more.

Last year, I tried to do this with my family. I pushed to leave the tree up and leave the lights up to see if we could make it till Epiphany on January 6 through the 12 days of Christmas. I think we all gave up about five days into it. I don't know why, other than the fact that it seems laborious to leave everything up. It seemed odd. You're the last house on the street with lights still on your house. But the question that kept bugging me or I kept wondering about was how and why the church celebrated 12 days.

Why 12 days to celebrate Christmas? When I came to this season as I'm preparing or have walked through Advent and Christmas, there's something deeply mysterious about this event called the Incarnation. See, I'm convinced that one of the reasons that 12 days is set aside for Christmas, which, by the way, is the origin of the song, the 12 Days of Christmas. There's something deeply mysterious about it. Yet, I think there's wisdom in the church calendar teaching us to slow down, to not race past Christmas, but to sit in that mystery.

So this morning, my hope is that we can enter into that mystery a little bit more. I want to tell some of the Christmas story as a way of probing and meditating on what it means that God became man. Because that is a profound mystery. I've been using the word incarnation for a few minutes now, and that may be new to you. I want to point to a familiar Christmas carol to help define that word. I'll define it a little bit later, but consider the lyrics of that famous Christmas carol, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Do you remember that line where it says, "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate deity."

I think that's a beautiful depiction of what we mean by incarnation. The opening line, "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see." You see, at the Incarnation at Christmas, we're celebrating this idea that God, the incarnate or Godhead, the wholeness of God, Father, Son, and Spirit, is made manifest or veiled in the flesh. This is something profoundly interesting. This is the incarnate deity. I used to have a professor who would say the Incarnation is God con carne, which I think is probably a little problematic to say, but he would say it a lot.

It's this idea of God with flesh on. This is God with meat on the bones. And this idea that God would actually descend and become man again is something that we take for granted because we're familiar with the Christmas story. But we don't often consider the mystery of it. Listen to what one thinker, Thomas Merton, once said.

Christmas is not merely a day like every other. It is a day made holy and special by a sacred mystery. It is not merely another day in the weary round of time, but today, eternity enters into time, and time sanctified is caught up into eternity. Merton

Merton's point is that this day of Christmas, the Incarnation, is deeply mysterious. It's when the eternal God, who has always existed, enters into time. This mystery of God becoming human, of eternity entering into time, and time then being caught up in eternity, is one of the reasons that the church decided that we need to not just celebrate this for a day, but we need to spend 12 days in the mystery of what all of this means for me and you.

To explore this more, I want to look at the way John's gospel unpacks this story. So, I want to look at John 1. John, one of the gospel writers, tells the Christmas story a bit differently than the rest of the gospel writers. And he does this from a different angle.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him, all things were made; without him, nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:1-5

So John opens his gospel with this famous prologue about what the Christmas story is exactly about. And he begins with this phrase, "In the beginning." Now, if you're a student of the Bible or have been around the scriptures at all, those three words should sound awfully familiar. It should point you all the way back to the beginning of the scriptures in Genesis.

This is where the opening lines of the entire scriptures say, "In the beginning." So why, then, does John choose these same three words to begin his gospel? I think he intentionally wants us to have in mind the beginning of all creation. And so there's something about John's gospel here when he says in the beginning. He's saying, "This story I'm about to tell you is about a new creation breaking in right in the middle of this creation." It's a sort of new beginning, a start of something radically new.

John chooses these words carefully because he's telling the story of an unfolding new world. From the very first words of his gospel, he's pointing to the hope and the arrival of Jesus, the Christmas story, God in the flesh, coming into humanity, being the beginning of a new world, but not somewhere else. It's right in the midst. It's eternity entering into time here and now.

John then goes on to say that in the beginning, it was the Word. Now, this idea of the word is one that we have to unpack a little bit because we can be somewhat familiar with it, but there's a larger narrative that John is telling here.

The Greek word for "word" is the *logos*, and here it means "word." That's a good translation for it, but it's much more the idea of meaning or something that's embodying an idea in the same way that words are that way. Our words, the language that we speak, are placeholders for a larger understanding of meaning.

So, John is somehow equating Jesus with this concept of the word. Now, it's hard for us to know that in the first century, the boundaries between different religions, philosophies, and cultures were more fluid than they are today. This isn't to say that all religions were the same in the first century. Absolutely not. That would not be an accurate statement, but rather,

the concepts and the ideas were often in dialogue with one another. And so this concept of the *logos* or the word is really a much broader category that John is pointing to Jesus. Jesus is the true *Logos*. So, this idea of *logos* would have been very popular in Greek philosophy, ancient philosophy, and other religions.

It had this concept of the rational principle of the universe, the organizing thing that held reality together. John is saying in the beginning was this Word, this principle, this reality that held all things together. And he says, this Word is Jesus, which we'll see in verse 14 in a little bit, where he equates those two things.

"In the beginning was the Word, and then he says, and the Word was with God in the beginning and through him all things were made that has been made." He's equating this concept of the Word as something that has been around for always, forever and ever. It was with God. And here's the kicker: it is God. It was with God, and the Word was God.

Here's where the mystery begins to gain some layers and some edge to it. This idea of the *Logos*, the Word, Jesus, has always existed with God. It is one of the three persons of the Godhead. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. John is drawing these concepts together that the Word, Jesus has been preexistent with God. He has always been there.

Then notice, as the story progresses, it says in him, that's the Word, the *Logos* in him was life. And that life was the light of all mankind. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." The crux of this paradox of understanding who God is comes down to this metaphor of light.

It's Jesus, the Word, who preexisted, always been around, and is the sort of embodiment of life itself. And so this life is bursting into the world. Remember, in the beginning, when Jesus arrives in the flesh, there's this whole new world, this whole new life that's breaking out into creation. Here's the reason this is important and the reason that John spends this creative time thinking through this idea.

Jesus is God. He isn't just speaking on behalf of God. He's the very expression of God, which means if you want to know the very essence and character of God, you and I don't need to look any further than Jesus. Jesus is the fullest revelation, the fullest expression of who God is. This is a profound mystery.

So the question, though, is if the Word was preexistent with God of all time, then what exactly are we celebrating at Christmas? It still doesn't necessarily

answer that question of why we need 12 days to sit in this mystery. I can get the idea that Jesus has always been with God, but then what is it that we are celebrating on Christmas? We'll look down at verse 14, where we see this word, *Lagos*, again. "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). Here is where we get the crux of John's Christmas story. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Word Became Flesh

The Word became flesh. There are two things that we have to unpack here. This idea of the Word becoming flesh. And secondly, that it made his dwelling among us. First, the Word became flesh. Now, this is a Greek word that, if you remember from our fasting series a little while ago that means flesh. However, in Paul's usage, it had this connotation of the fallenness of humanity.

I remember in that series, I mentioned that it's not always that context because here's another one here. When John uses the word flesh, he doesn't mean our fallen nature. He means quite literally the flesh, the meat, the bones, the things that create a human being. And so when John says that the Word became flesh, he's saying the Word, the divine reality of God, has become the very fullest human that it is.

The Word became flesh. God became flesh. Again, this is a profound mystery. It really is a stunning paradox that when you try to understand the idea of God being fully divine and fully human, both in the same being, it's difficult to really wrap our heads around it. But all I want you to catch is this: At Christmas, we are not celebrating the creation of Jesus. Jesus was pre-existent. He was the Word there before all time. What we're celebrating is the Incarnation, the arrival of God in the flesh. This is something utterly different. This means that when the Word became flesh, the very transcendent God, who's above all and stronger, more powerful than anything, became as finite and as imminent as a human.

Made His Dwelling Among Us

This Word became flesh, and then what does John say it did? Made his dwelling among us. Now, this is a fascinating phrase because "this Word made his dwelling or dwelt among us" is the exact same word that the Greek writers would use for the word Tabernacle. What is the Tabernacle? The Tabernacle, if

you remember from the Old Testament, was the tent or the gathering place they'd carry around wherever they went, wherever they traveled through the ancient world.

When they set up camp, they'd set up the Tabernacle because the it was similar to the synagogue, the church building, if you will. It was the meeting place where the people of God would meet with God. Theologically speaking, it was the overlap of heaven and earth. If you wanted to meet with the presence of God in the Old Testament, you would go to the Tabernacle.

This is profound because what John is saying is that the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, meaning that if you and I want to meet with God, we have to go no further than the very person of Jesus. In fact, some translations will actually say the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.

This is deeply mysterious because this is something that, for Israelites in the Old Testament, would have been this profoundly confusing. The idea of a person being able to just go to a person as opposed to a place. But there's some sort of beautiful mystery in this. If we want to encounter God, we simply go to Jesus.

Christmas is the opportunity for us to enter into this Word becoming flesh and tabernacling among us. This is a mystery of God the infinite, God the transcendent, God the imminent, God the close God, the near. This is something that begins to confound our categories. We have a hard time placing God in these small, finite areas.

To close, I want to point out things I've pointed out along the way already, three mysteries of the Incarnation that are worth us slowing down and paying attention to this Christmas time.

Mystery of the Incarnation - Paradox

The first is the mystery of the Incarnation, which reveals the paradox of God. It's hard for us to wrap our heads around this, but the first mystery is that God truly did become human.

We say this so regularly, but we never really stop to consider that God, infinite in being, became finite in being. We have this bias that we, as in the modern Western world, arrogantly believe we can understand everything. We come with a clean slate and have the capacity within us to really understand these sorts of things. But again, I think we'd be remiss not to pause

in a season like Christmas and consider that maybe this is something beyond our comprehension.

I'm reminded of Paul in Philippians 2. Paul writes about Christ Jesus,

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Philippians 2:5-8

See the mystery, the paradox of the Incarnation, which is that when God became human, he subjected himself to the fullest of the human experience. And Paul says that Jesus did not consider that divinity something to be grasped, but rather set it aside even to the point where he would walk through the experience of death.

This is what's so profound about the paradox, this Incarnation is when we get to Lent, when we get to Good Friday, we recognize Jesus as walking the most human of paths, walking through death itself. Of course, we know that Easter's coming, but we shouldn't rush past that paradox. Paul's beautiful poetic expression of who is Jesus is a stunning picture of what the divine is. So, the first mystery again is that the Incarnation reveals the paradox of God.

Mystery of the Incarnation - Character

Secondly, the mystery of the Incarnation reveals the character of God. It builds off of that first mystery, but here's what's so interesting. If Jesus sets aside that divinity and steps into humanity, that changes what we understand about the character of God. The Christmas story reveals that most clearly this character of God by the fact that Jesus was born in obscurity. He was born in poverty, and he was born in vulnerability.

Born in Obscurity

Consider the story that you know so well. First, he was born in obscurity. The Christmas story is one where an angel reveals to Mary that she is going to give birth to Jesus, the Messiah. Mary and Joseph were in a corner of the Roman empire. They're stuck under oppression, and they take this long journey to Bethlehem, where they're trying to evade and keep their life together. I imagine as they're sitting in that manger, Mary felt the bitterness of, I would imagine a significant loneliness, as the labor pains began to set in. Maybe it was Joseph and possibly a midwife, but the reality is Mary,

Joseph, and the very Son of God were alone. They're born into obscurity.

It's not the way we would understand a king, a God, showing up on the scene. We would expect much more pomp, much more circumstance, and much more elaborateness to the story. But here we understand the very character of God is one that works in the obscure things, works in the small things. Jesus was born in utter obscurity.

Born in Poverty

Secondly, he was born in poverty. Remember, it wasn't that as the story progresses, God reveals to the shepherds of Jesus' birth that the shepherds come. Now, shepherds did not have an elite role in society. If anything, they were ones that would have been lowly disregarded in the world, but it's these shepherds that God chooses to reveal the birth of Jesus to. And it's something in them that you see the shepherds when they hear of Jesus' birth, they act in response to that news. They go to see Jesus and praise and tell others about it.

There's something about the poverty of the shepherds where they recognize Jesus and Mary, this sort of poverty of akin to fellow strugglers in poverty. There's something about this that Jesus was born in humble poverty.

Born in Vulnerability

Then, lastly, you see Jesus born into a situation of great vulnerability. Do you remember that at the time of Jesus' birth, there was immense turmoil going on in the first century? It wasn't just that Jesus was poor, but rather that he was on the run from King Herod, and Herod had gone to these great extents to extinguish any threat to his power and authority.

Mary and Joseph were running out of town for their life. It was a scene of vulnerability that Jesus was born into obscurity, poverty, and vulnerability. These are not the characteristics that you and I would assume about God. There's something mysterious about this. You see, it should be no shock to us that throughout the first century, as Jesus came into his own, as he began to make these claims that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, everyone in the first century was looking to him and saying what you and I say, "That is not the way God looks. That's not the way God lives."

People would get upset with Jesus because he would do things that shocked their understanding of who God was. I hope that you and I do not succumb to that sort of naivete to think that we have the correct

view of God, but rather, my hope is we come with the humility to say that the Incarnation of the Word becoming flesh shocks our understanding of God. May we enter into that mystery to say, there's something about the character of God that we're learning new. This is not what we anticipated in the way that God would arrive.

Mystery of the Incarnation - Overlap

If the mystery of the Incarnation reveals the paradox of God, the mystery of the Incarnation reveals the character of God. Lastly, the mystery of the Incarnation is the overlap of heaven and earth. The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. This mystery of heaven and earth overlapping in the person of Jesus is so profound and mysterious that words begin to fall apart as we consider it.

The reality is this new world being birthed right here in the midst of this one is one in which we can enter the reality of heaven here and now. The person of Jesus is that overlap of heaven and earth. There's a hope that pulses through this story because what Mary and Joseph long for, what you and I long for, is for the world to be put back to rights. We pray as Jesus instructed us for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven because we long for this overlap.

Right now, we live in the time between that fully happening. Jesus has arrived, but he has not returned again a second time to establish that kingdom in its fullest expression. The fact is that the Incarnation is the beginning of that. We see a foretaste of heaven and earth overlapping. You and I can step into that reality here. And now you see this story of the Incarnation, this mystery of what it means for the Word to become flesh is one that I pray you and I don't rush past. My hope is that this Christmas season, maybe even if all your decorations are already in boxes and tucked away in the attic, that you still carve out a little bit of time to consider this mystery of what it means for you and me that Jesus, the God man became flesh and entered into our story.

My invitation is for you is to not rush past Christmas. We'll have time to get back to the ordinary days of our life. I invite you to enter into Christmastide, a

season to slow down, to consider the mystery of the Incarnation again.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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