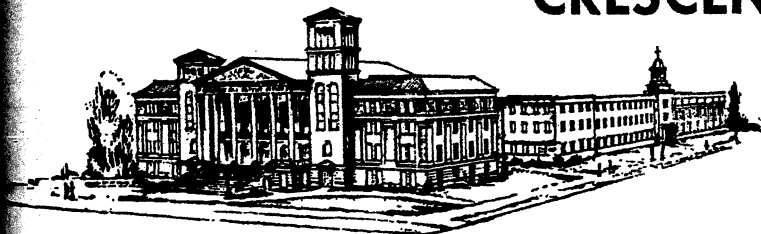


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"A 'DOWN-TO-EARTH' GOD"

Sunday Morning, December 11, 1960
John R. Claypool

In this country our celebration of the Christmas season has assumed a familiar pattern: we secure a tree, we decorate it with the same ornaments, we set up the traditional nativity scene, and we wear ourselves out addressing cards and buying presents. All this has become such an ingrained habit that we may not realize that it long ago ceased to have any meaning for us. Our holiday activity, though frenzied, may be little more than an unthinking, conditioned response to an established stimulus. And if there is a tendency for our practice to become lost in empty familiarity, how much greater is the threat to its message! How long has it been since you sat down and thoughtfully contemplated the event to which Christmas points? I do not mean singing "Silent Night" or reading Luke's euphonous account of the birth of Christ. I mean piercing behind these shop-worn symbols to the stark reality of what happened on that Palestinian night. For you see, at the heart of the Christmas story is a startling and staggering assertion; if it had happened yesterday and been understood, the paper today would be full of it. What is it? Simply this—God became a man. He descended the staircase of heaven and stepped onto the stage of human history in the form of a tiny, newborn baby. Nothing like it had ever happened before. To the pagan world the unique privilege of the gods was that they did not have to worry about this earth. They could live up there above and beyond it. It was this fact that made them gods. But here you have the paradox of paradoxes—God, who could have stayed in heaven, voluntarily coming to this suffering world. That is the stabbing message of Christmas—it is the story of a "down-to-earth" God.

I am afraid we have missed this, not only in our thinking about Christmas, but in our understanding of the Gospel. I myself was well along in years before I realized this radical truth—that at one point in history God lived here as a man. I have known many other people who were acquainted with Christianity, but had never encountered this truth. One day I was reading a little book by J. B. Phillips entitled: When God Was Man. I left it on the desk, and our maid, in cleaning up, saw its title. She came into the room where I was working and with obvious excitement began to ask: "Is this true? When did this happen? What does it mean?" She was a life-long member of a church, but the idea was brand new to her. And I wonder how many others are "living in the Kingdom and yet have never seen the face of the King"; how many church people move through our programs and Christmas season after Christmas season, and never realize that God has come, that the Eternal has entered time, that the Invisible has become visible, that He who we once thought of as "in heaven" has in truth come down to this earth?

This morning, as simply and as clearly as I know how, I want to tell you that this is true. The God of Christianity is a "down-to-earth" God. John's Gospel

begins with the words, "God expressed Himself,"¹ and reaches its climax by saying "God became a human being and lived among us, and we saw His splendor, full of grace and truth."² The primary message of Christmas is not about a visitor from the North Pole; it is about the visit of God Himself from heaven.

If He has come, as I surely believe, what does this mean? Who could ever or fully answer this question? Here is inexhaustible truth, but let me point to two things. Because of His coming, we can know Him, and He can know us.

First of all, the coming of God opens the possibility of knowing Him. Now the primary characteristic of deity is His absolute uniqueness. God is other than man. He exists on an entirely different level of being; from an ontological standpoint He is radically distinct from man. This fact creates a real problem as far as human knowledge is concerned. We cannot know that which is utterly different. We simply do not have the capacities to understand God as He is in Himself. Just as an ant is on a different level of existence and therefore cannot comprehend a human being, so man is unable to grasp the essence of God. There is nothing man can do with his limited capacities; the only conceivable possibility is for God to span the chasm and put Himself in a form that man can understand.

This is exactly what God began on the first Christmas. At His own gracious initiative, God assumed flesh and blood and entered the realm of time and space. He transposed the essence of Godness into "the frequency" that human capacities could receive. The Invisible became visible, the Inaudible became audible, the Incomprehensible became comprehensible. Now the need for concrete expression is basic to human understanding. In order to grasp any abstract reality, there is the necessity for some tangible illustration. Take, for instance, the ideals of beauty, truth, and goodness. How would you define these to a little child? Words could be multiplied on end, and still there be no effective communication. But if you had a rose, you could say, "Look, beauty is like this," and then he could understand. You could try your best to describe by words the idea of truth, but if you had one "fact," one statement that was in obvious accord with reality, you could say, "Look, this is truth," and through the concrete the abstract would become known. The same is true for goodness. One good man, who embodies this quality would be worth a million words of abstract description. Just in the last few months I have become acutely aware of the human need for concretization. Our little boy was having trouble distinguishing colors. Now you do not just sit down and talk about "red" in the abstract. I found the only way to communicate this was to take a red marble or a red book and say, "This is red." Now this need for concrete expression is apropos to God's coming at Christmas. For, you see, what a red marble is to redness, the man Jesus is to God. To use Paul's expression: "He is the visible expression of the invisible God."³ He is the means by which the eternal God makes Himself known. When the Word—that is, the "expression of God"—became flesh and took up residence with us, then we were able to behold Him, to see Him, to hear Him, to understand what God is like. This is one of the glorious truths of Christianity, that God has put Himself in a form we can comprehend, that He has not chosen to dwell apart and aloof from us, but has taken the initiative and crossed the chasm of otherness, and made Himself knowable to us. John has two words to sum up this coming: "grace" and "truth." The Christmas story is a flash of truth in a night of ignorance; it is an expression of grace to an undeserving race. One of the exciting implications of a "down-to-earth" God is that now we can know Him and understand what He is like.

1. J. B. Phillips translation of John 1:1.

2. Ibid., John 1:14.

3. Ibid., Colossians 1:15.

But there is a second ramification: because God has come as a human being, He can know what it is like to live upon this earth. This entrance into history involved full participation in human existence. He took upon Himself every limitation that is ours; He lived under exactly the circumstances that you do and I do. Thus He learned from first-hand experience, from actual participation, the nature of creaturely existence. This fact immediately establishes a bond of fellowship and understanding that nothing else can do. Over and over in times of crisis I have seen certain people drawn close together because they have walked the same path. I have been seated by bereaved people in a funeral home, and seen someone slip up and say, "I know exactly what you're going through, and I share your sorrow," and seen the comforting effect of these words. In life there comes a certain closeness and a deeper capacity for sympathy when two have shared the same experience. And this basic law of identification through common sharing gives real significance to God's coming—for it means through His life here on earth He has taken our experience unto Himself, and can now sympathize and comfort and assure in ways that would never have been possible had He not come.

I have seen this truth become a mighty source of healing in a troubled life. I once sat by the bedside of a man who was teetering on the brink of a nervous breakdown. The company for which he had worked for twenty years had changed management and he had been fired. He was stunned by the unfairness of it and the insecurity it created. As he lay there in tremendous mental anguish, I said: "I cannot erase the past or change the outward conditions of the present. But I can remind you that God knows what you are going through, for when He lived here, He was betrayed, unjustly treated, misunderstood. He understands insecurity, for by His own words, He 'had no place to lay His head,' no place to call His own." The man looked at me in amazement and said, "You know, I'd never thought of that." As time went on he began to recover, and he told me afterward that this one realization was the turning point. To realize that God knows what it is like and therefore can sympathize is one of the transforming ideas of Christianity. If you follow the life of the Master, you will see that there is no problem common to man that He did not experience. And this means everything.

One of the most poignant pieces of religious drama⁴ I have ever known was written by a German minister shortly after the close of World War II. The shambles of Nazism were all about—property destroyed, thousands of DP's, no homes, no income, no hope. These were desperate days, and against this background the play is written. It is an effort to discover who is responsible for the terrible plight of the times. A trial is held, and many fingers of condemnation are pointed—the Fuehrer, the Jews, the apathetic "common man" who allowed it to grow. Finally someone accuses God, and everyone joins in agreement. Certainly, He is the one, for He started this miserable world in the beginning. So accused, the court finds God guilty, and passes on Him the severest possible sentence—He must live on this earth as a human being. Three archangels are charged with carrying out the sentence. The first says: "I will see to it that He is born on the back side of nowhere, in a country ruled by a foreign power. He'll be born in a barn to a peasant maid, and worst of all, I'll see to it that He's a Jew." The second angel says: "I'll see to it that God lives in insecurity and knows a tortured life. He'll have no place to lay His head, His family will forsake Him, His best friends deny Him. I'll see to it that no one understands Him and that He knows the pain of indifference." The third angel says: "I shall see to it that God knows the horror of death. He'll be killed like a common criminal between two thieves." And then the stage clears and an eerie silence falls over all, for suddenly they realize that God has already served His sentence. He knows what it is like on this earth. And that is another part of the glorious message of Christmas!

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Yes, in this season of celebration, may you pierce through the tinsel and contemplate the real event. God has come to this world. He is not "off there" somewhere. Because of Christmas, we realize that He is a "down-to-earth" God. And what does that mean? Now I can know Him, and now He can know me. And what does that mean? Everything, my friend, everything!