

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Friday, December 24, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 1:14

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

GOD’S CHRISTMAS GIFT

More than a century ago, Soren Kierkegaard, the renowned Danish philosopher and theologian, wrote a haunting little story that has always intrigued me. It was about a young prince who was single but very eager to meet and marry a lovely young woman who would be his future queen. Near his palace was a large city, and often he rode in his carriage into the city to take care of various items of state business for his father, the king. One day, in order to reach a particular destination, he had to go through a rather poor section of the city. As he did so, he happened to glance out of the carriage window and right into the eyes of the most beautiful girl he had ever seen!

He had occasion during the next few days to return to that section of the city, drawn as he was by the possibility of perhaps meeting the girl. And believe it or not, he had the good fortune, once or twice, to meet her on the street, and speak to her. Soon he began to feel that he was really in love with her. But now he had a problem. How should he proceed to win her hand?

Of course, he could order her to the palace and there propose marriage. But even a prince would like to feel that the girl he marries really wants to marry him. Or perhaps, somewhat more graciously, he could arrive at her door in his most dazzling uniform, and with a courtly bow, ask for her hand. But again, even a prince wants to marry for love, and there are motives other than that for wanting to marry a wealthy and resplendent prince! Again, he could masquerade as a peasant and try to gain her interest. After he proposed, he could pull off his “mask”, so to speak. Still, the masquerade would be a “phony”. He really could not go that route.

Finally, a viable solution presented itself to his mind. He would give up his princely home and lifestyle and move into her neighborhood. There he would take up work as, say, a carpenter. During his work in the daytime, and during his time off in the evening, he would get acquainted with the people, share their interests and concerns and begin to talk their language. And in due time, hopefully, he would make her acquaintance in a natural way. Should she come to love him, as he had already come to love her, then he would ask her to marry him. This he did, and when she did come to love him, he told her who he really was.

This Christmastide, the point of this simple but beautiful story is surely clear enough. In very human terms it is a summary of God’s problem with us, His earth-born creation. God wishes to join our lives with His in the most intimate and loving relationship. He could have created us without freedom of the will and made us so that we would love and obey Him because we had no other choice. In a word, He could have ordered us to unite ourselves with Him. But God refused to create puppets who would always do what the big Hand inside dictated. What He really wants is our voluntary devotion and service.

Or He could have appeared to us in His Kingly glory; but who would not, in sheer awe, obey such a King? However, the only thing He wanted was our free response to love, and this He must gain by meeting us on our own level. Any kind of masquerade would not do; so, He came to us just where we are!

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Greek is very beautiful; it means literally, “The Word became flesh and lived in our tent.” Or we could render it, “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” You remember how the “Tabernacle”, that great tent that accompanied the children of Israel on their forty-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, was symbolic of the presence of God with His people. When those people went to worship in the Tabernacle, they went there to get close to God. In the innermost shrine of the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, was the Ark of the Covenant, and on the top of the Ark, two cherubim, one at each end, with spread wings, facing each other. God said in Exodus 25:22, “There... between the two cherubim that are over the Ark... I will meet with you.” In Exodus 40:34 we read that “The glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle”! Now do you see how the Tabernacle was a type of Christ? “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory...”!

“The Word became flesh and lived in our tent.” He couldn’t come any closer to us than that! As a lovely Child, as a fine young Man, as a competent Carpenter, as a travelling Evangelist, He moved among people where they lived. And when some of them came to love Him, and respond to Him, and follow Him, He then revealed to them Who He really is.

This is the real meaning and miracle of Christmas — that the eternal God became Man and visited our little planet to show us the very heart of God!

“The Word became flesh...” In Scripture, “the Word of God” is a synonym for God Himself. “The Word of God” is God in creative action, the creating power behind the universe. The Psalmist says, “God spoke, and it came to be.” (Ps. 33:9) “By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth.” (Ps. 33:6)

How do we communicate our thoughts, our personality, to others? How do they come to know us for what we are? Mainly by our words. How could God reveal Himself completely to us? How could He perfectly communicate with us? By “The Word” — Jesus Christ, the God-Man.

Back in the year 1099, St. Anselm of Canterbury wrote a book which proved to be one of the most outstanding theological treatises of all time. He entitled it (in Latin), “Cur Deus Homo?” — “Why did God become Man?” The answer, of course, is that only by becoming man could He ever reveal to us Who He really is; and only by becoming man could He save us from our sins, and from eternal death which is the penalty for sin.

A gentleman was walking one day in his garden when suddenly his shadow fell across an ant hill. The poor ants scurried underground as fast as they could, obviously terrified by this huge bulk that had borne down upon them. But the man was a kind-hearted person, and as he witnessed this sad scene, he reflected, “I do not dislike these little creatures. I would not harm

them for the world!” And then he pondered, “How could I ever convince them that I like them?” Suddenly it dawned upon him, “The only way I could ever communicate with them and assure them of my benevolence toward them would be for me to become an ant myself, and thus make contact with them!”

That was why God had to become Man — so that He could finally and perfectly reveal to us how, though He hates our sin, He nevertheless loves us with an unconditional and everlasting love.

Sometimes people tend to think of God as only stern and avenging; and they imagine that something that Jesus did changed God’s anger into love and altered God’s attitude toward us. But the New Testament knows nothing of any such idea. What Jesus did was to open a window in time so that we might see the eternal and unchanging love of God.

I remember hearing about a little girl who was once confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty parts of the Old Testament. Her comment was, “But that happened before God became a Christian”! But John, in this magnificently sublime introduction to his Gospel, is telling us that God was always a Christian! He tells us that this “Word”, the Lord Jesus Christ, pre-existed from all eternity, and that God has, therefore, always been exactly as Jesus revealed Him to be — Holy Love. But people could never know and realize and assimilate this profound truth until Jesus came to earth.

There in that manger, the infant Jesus, a child like any one of us, is the sign and assurance of God’s incredible condescension — God’s willingness to come and be one of us, that He might die for us, and so win our love on our own level — the level of our humanity. To do this, God gave us His greatest Gift — the Christmas Gift —HIMSELF!

Sometimes at Christmas we receive things we do not really need. But God’s Gift never falls in this class. The person was never born who does not need God Himself. As a famous agnostic once said, “There is a God—shaped blank in every soul.” How we need Jesus!

But let us never sentimentalize the Child of Bethlehem. Remember, it is only eight miles from Bethlehem, where He was born, to Calvary where He died. You must never separate His birth from His death; because in the most profound sense, He was born to die — to die for others — to die for you and for me; so that a holy God could still be holy and yet forgive the sinner who puts his trust in Christ’s finished work of redemption for us upon the Cross, where He took our place and paid our penalty in full.

Have you, by Faith, accepted God’s Christmas Gift? One Christmas season a little girl stood at a counter in a large department store. Clutching the hand of a poorly dressed woman, the child stared at a big, beautiful doll. Hopelessly the mother was wondering and calculating how many hours she would have to work to earn enough money to buy the doll for her little daughter. Then she said to the salesgirl, “Could she perhaps hold it for just a moment?” The salesgirl smiled as she handed the doll across the counter. The child’s eyes opened wide with wonder as she clutched the doll in her arms. Finally, her mother took the doll and said to her daughter, “We must give it back now.” Neither one of them noticed the way the salesgirl glanced at a man at the

other end of the counter, and the way he nodded in response. Then the salesgirl took the doll, put it in a big box, and tied the box with a Christmas ribbon. Handing the box to the child, she said with a big smile, "We want you to have this as our Christmas present to you"; and to the astonished mother she whispered, "With the compliments of the store." After the grateful mother and child had left, the man at the other end of the counter came up and paid the bill, and then disappeared. To a customer who had witnessed this touching drama, the salesgirl explained, "I don't know who he is, but during the Christmas season he comes every year and does this a number of times."

Again, this Christmastide our Lord Jesus Christ stands, as it were, at the far end of the counter. And as, in His name, I offer you the gift of eternal life, I want you to know that it is free, but it is not cheap; because it has been paid for in full when He died for you on the Cross.

His Christmas Gift, HIMSELF, your Savior, is offered in love, because He does not desire that anyone should perish. He wants you to accept salvation as His free gift to you. Needless to say, you can't have it if you won't accept it. Take Him, by faith, as the greatest Gift you have ever received!

"Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy Kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home there was found no room
For Thy holy nativity:
Oh come to my heart, Lord Jesus;
There is room in my heart for Thee."

If you say that, then Christmas 1993 will be the greatest and grandest time of your life!

"The Word became flesh and lived in our tent."

AMEN.