

Skin in the Game

John 1:14

Merry Christmas! I want to share this evening from the shortest...and most unusual ...of Christmas stories. The traditional Christmas story is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Luke tells it from Mary's perspective; with angels and lighting effects and songs and poetry and Mary and Elizabeth having coffee together and comparing pregnancy stories. Luke is like the Hallmark Channel version of Christmas. Matthew, on the other hand, is Joseph's account. It has wise men on an epic, cross-country adventure, wicked King Herod plotting to murder the baby Jesus and the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt. Matthew is like the Spike TV version of Christmas. And with both of these, we piece together the familiar story of Jesus' birth.

But there is one more Christmas story in the New Testament. The gospel-writer John takes us back, not to Bethlehem, but to the beginning of time. He uses a poetic nickname for the super hero of his story. He calls him "The Word." And in the opening verses of his gospel make breathtaking claims about "The Word." Listen:

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word WAS God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and that life was the light of man."

You could hardly pack more meaning into three sentences! It is a soaring... majestic...description of this mysterious person called "The Word." We are told that The Word is GOD...that The Word is eternal...that The Word is the creator of all things... the Word is the giver of all life. You can't get much loftier than that.

But THEN comes the shocker...in verse 14. If you had background music playing, just before you read these words you would hear, "Duh duh duh duhhhhh": "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father..."

That one verse...is John's Christmas story. And suddenly, we realize he is talking about the birth of Jesus. Luke has angels and shepherds and a manger. Matthew has wise men and King Herod and a daring escape to Egypt. And John ...has fifteen words: "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory...."

You may not realize it, but these are the most astonishing words ever written. Let's look more closely. First, John says that when we look at Jesus, we are looking upon the glory of God. Glory is a religious word used a lot at Christmas. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, "the glory of the Lord shone around them." Then the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest..." But we don't use

“glory” much. So we really don’t understand what a big deal it is to say that, when we look at Jesus, we have seen the “glory” of God.

So maybe this will help. (Welder’s mask) Know what this is? A welder’s mask. Any of you ever arc-welded? I have, a little. And the number one thing to remember is...you never, ever, EVER look at the arc with the naked eye. If you do, it will damage your cornea; it’s called “arc eye.” That’s what this mask is for. The human eye is not made to gaze upon such intense light.

And until that first Christmas Eve, that’s what it was like for a human to look at God. Throughout the Old Testament, God is described as “glorious.” Holy... awesome... brilliant. No human could look upon the face of God ... because of his glory. It’s like looking into the welder’s arc; mere humans cannot bear it. And for that reason, God seemed distant, unknowable; perhaps even harsh or judgmental.

And maybe that’s how YOU view God. Powerful, holy, awesome, but distant! Irrelevant, even. If that describes your view of God... have I got a Christmas gift for you! John says that, because of Jesus, we can dump the mask! The God who was far off, unattainable... frightening ... suddenly we can look upon him. We can see his glory! So how did that happen?

Well... “The word became flesh....” Come on!!! How can a divine, eternal, creator, life-giving super hero... put on human flesh? How is that possible? My daughter, Rachel, was seated on a flight to Istanbul next to a Muslim man named Osman. The conversation turned to religion...and Osman said, kindly, but in all seriousness: “How can you Christians believe that God would have a son and become a human being? Allah is all-powerful and glorious. He would not do such a thing.” But...what if he did? Because ...that’s PRECISELY what happened. Powerful and glorious God... put on human flesh. And that’s not the half of it. Wait until you hear what he did next.

“The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That’s a weak translation. The original Greek says “The word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” The tabernacle PIC was a tent in the Old Testament where God met Moses. When the Israelites moved to a new camp site, the tabernacle was packed up and carried along. When they stopped, it was the first thing set up. The tabernacle was the portable meeting place ...the tent...that allowed God to be with his people wherever their wanderings took them.

So...when John says that The Word “tabernacled” with us...what he’s REALLY saying is this: the divine, eternal, creator, life-giving super hero became a human being...and did this. Pitched his tent in our neighborhood! Now why would an all-powerful, glorious God do such a thing? Because he wanted a relationship with us. He wanted to be close to us, even in OUR wanderings. In fact...amazingly...he wanted us to become his kids.

That’s what it says! “But to all who [received Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God....” Think about that! Not only are we able to look upon God....to come close to him without fear. Now...he has given us the RIGHT to become his KIDS! His sons! His daughters!

We live in an entitled age. We all have our “rights” and we cling ferociously to them. But what if God himself gave you the RIGHT to become his child? He won’t force it ...but he offers it. The right to become God’s kids. Would you claim THAT right? Because that is the ULTIMATE entitlement!

This is one of the most famous pictures from the Kennedy presidency. Kennedy’s son, John John, playing under his father’s desk as JFK carried on the work of the country. Tell me...who else would have been allowed to crawl under JFK’s desk? Vice President Johnson was the second most powerful man in the world. How about him? I don’t think so! Only a son, only a child, has that kind of access to the father.

This is what God longs to give you. No matter how far off you’ve been, no matter how ashamed you feel, no matter how fearful you might be of a punitive God...when Jesus pitched his tent in our neighborhood, it was our Father saying, “I love you. I want a relationship with you. I want you to be my child--my son, my daughter.” Who wouldn’t want that?

So...what’s the catch? Work really hard to impress God? Check off the religious boxes? Earn his favor? Nope! John simply says. “Believe in Jesus.” Believe Jesus really is God with skin on; believe Jesus can forgive you of your shame; believe Jesus can give you a different perspective on life that makes more sense than the rat race that is swallowing you alive; believe Jesus can give you a heart that cares more for others and less about yourself. If you believe in Jesus that way...God gives you the RIGHT to become his child.

THAT’S what Christmas Eve is REALLY all about. God...loving you...God drawing near to you...God inviting you to believe in his Son so that he might make you one of his kids.