



This Is the Stranger's Town

TEXT
John 1:1-14

December 3, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In Advent, we await the birth of the Christ child. This wondrous story — filled with angels, magi from the east and guiding stars of night — reminds us that Jesus was like us; he was human. This soaring poetry of John does the same: the Word became flesh. The old confession of the church says he was born of woman as is every child. The good news of Christmas is that the birth of Jesus means that God has come to us. God's spirit is in human life. The theologians call this the doctrine of the incarnation, the bold affirmation that God has come to us — but not only to us; God has come as one of us.

He came as one of us, but he was not like us. There is a difference between his spirit and our spirit. There is a difference between what he sees and what we see, between what he chooses and what we choose.

That old confession of the church says, He was born of woman as is every child, yet born of God's [spirit] as was no other child.¹ There is a strangeness about him.

To know what that means, just remember what he taught us:

Forgive seventy times seven. If you have forgiven more than a time or two, I mean really forgiven, it's hard to imagine seventy times seven. Why so much?

Take up your own cross. Really? Why? What is supposed to happen when you sacrifice life — and for whom?

Love your neighbor. That's a bit easier when we get to pick our neighbors. There's a long history of folks trying to pick their neighbors to ensure who their neighbors are. We do that with gates and clubs, with rules and with walls. But with God, we don't get to pick our neighbors; our neighbors are given.

As the psalmist says, his ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. There is a strangeness about him.

Over the next few weeks, I want to think about this strangeness. But today, just for a few minutes, will you think with me about this: Why would God do this? The incarnation did not have to happen. Why would God choose to come to town? To live where we live? Why did the incarnation happen?

Throughout history, some have found the incarnation impossible to believe, and others

have found it offensive. Why? Because the world is not a holy place. Why would a holy God dwell in an unholy place? As we say here, this world is beautiful, but so much of it is broken. It seems that each week, there is a new reason for anxiety. The structures of our lives and society are imperfect; they cause injury and harm. There is a brokenness to our economy and to our politics and to our community. Too many are left behind or passed over. Every week there is a new reason for anxiety.

Again this week, the news is awash in revelations of sexual misconduct, even abuse, coming from Congress, from the media and entertainment. These are places such complaints can find media coverage. Of course, there are endless small businesses and offices, shops and schools where such behavior occurs and might be lifted up, but there is no reporter to tell the story.

But more than that, these kinds of reports are not new to us. As long as men have been in positions of power, these circumstances have occurred. And I think this is our confession. The way we have often dealt with such allegations in

the past — allegations that are often difficult to prove and so easy to deny — we have said, “But wait, these are important men. They do important things. They are CEOs or senators; they are presidents or Supreme Court justices; they are football coaches, and some of them are even pastors.”

These important men can’t be compromised over a little “boys will be boys” attitude. We have said that to ourselves, particularly when the offender was on our team or from our party or someone we cared about or admired. I have been guilty of such rationalizations. Maybe you have too. We would tell ourselves there are more important principles at stake, so these women would just have to pay the price for their proximity to power.

It’s unsettling how surprisingly comfortable we can be with the suffering of others when we are convinced there is a greater good being served.

This is just the latest expression of how we often elevate partial goods to justify wrong. Nobody is saying they want women to be mistreated — just like few say racism is a good thing. Nobody claims that they want the poor to find the economic system to be an inescapable maze of oppression — not that, no, of course not. But there are larger principles, we have insisted, which means sometimes folks just have to be sacrificed because of their proximity to power.

If this is our world, and it is, some ask: “Why would a

holy God take on skin and walk where we walk?” Some find that impossible, others offensive — an insult to God.

Some ancients looked at the world and said, “God would have nothing to do with this world.” Our salvation is actually found in the capacity to escape this world.

Several years ago, the Presbyterian Women brought Elaine Pagels to be our visiting scholar. Dr. Pagels is a scholar of gnostic literature. A central teaching of gnostic theology is that creation is bad. Creation was a mistake, the gnostics assert. I mean look around. God’s plan for salvation is to teach us to escape the world — escape it mentally while we are here and, in the end, escape it literally. Our spirit slips out, shaking off the fragility of finitude, and we become one with God.

But John sees God differently, and therefore he sees the world differently. John sees creation not as a mistake, but as a gracious, loving act of God. The spirit of God, whom John calls the Word, became flesh and dwells with us, lives where we live. Why?

Because the love that we see in Jesus is the same love that gave birth to the whole of creation. *All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.* There didn’t have to be a world, but the world exists because God desired a world.

Now I don’t think this suggests that Jesus of Nazareth was involved in the mechanics of creation, but I think it

is an affirmation that the same love that we witness in Christ is witnessed in creation of the universe. Creation may have been a big bang, but it was also a choice of love. This is why the incarnation occurs. God came to us, as one of us, because God simply can’t stay away. God came as one of us because this is God’s home and you are God’s family. God can’t stay away.

My friend Tom Long² tells of something that happened in his church in Atlanta. Their pastor was taking a new call, and it was his last Sunday. The church was crowded as everyone came to say goodbye. The children’s choir sang that morning, and the children were instructed, when they finished, to just stand in place on the steps, and their parents would come get them.

They sang beautifully. It was a nice moment. Then the parents came to retrieve the children, and as the chaos cleared, there was one little girl standing by herself. She just stood obediently. Heads began to turn around. Her father was seated in the back, and there were extra chairs; people were moving, and he was delayed in getting to the front. But when he did, Tom said the little girl jumped into his arms and said loud enough for all to hear, “I knew you’d come. I just knew you’d come.”

I think that’s what John is saying, and I think that is the confession of the church: *I knew you’d come, Lord Jesus, I just knew you’d come.* Because

it was love that breathed this beautiful and broken world into being. This is your home. And we are your family. The incarnation happened, because God just can't stand to stay away.

¹Paraphrased from A Declaration of Faith, approved by the General Assembly of the PCUS in 1977. It is not a constitutional Confession of the church.

²Cited from Tom's sermon "Can You See the Bright Morning Star?" preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York on November 19, 2017.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.