

The Word Became Flesh
The First Missionary (John 1:14-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 20, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ This is that time of year when the term *miracle* pops up more often in headlines, in print and media. You'll come across news reports about a "Christmas miracle" describing some good deed or circumstance where generosity was on display. You'll turn on the television and you'll see a rerun of "*Miracle on 34th Street*". And of course there's always that sentiment that anything could happen on Christmas – even a miracle.
 - ▶ All of this is because at the center of our holiday celebration is a miracle. The miracle of miracles. **The Incarnation – that historic event in human history where Christians claim that God became flesh.**
 - That's what incarnation means. It comes from the Latin word *carne*. I'm sure you're familiar with that term. Think about it. You go out for Tex-Mex, and you can either order chili or chili con carne – chili *with meat* (with flesh). So incarnation literally means "in the flesh". **God incarnate is God in the flesh.**

- ❖ That's a huge miracle, and a huge claim to make in our secularized day and age. But it's so central to the Christian faith, to the gospel. If you deny this miracle, if you can't get past the Incarnation, then the rest of what you read in the Gospels – about Jesus' teachings, his signs, his works, his deeds, his death and resurrection – all of it will make no sense and will be treated as mere fiction. Because there's no way a mere man could do such things.
 - ▶ But if you can accept the Incarnation, if Jesus is truly God come in the flesh, then it all makes sense. It's all plausible. There's a point to the whole story. So we'll have to grapple with this miracle. We'll have to consider it carefully, and I hope to do just that in our time together.

- ❖ But the bigger point I want to stress this morning is that the Incarnation is not just a miracle. It's missions! **On that first Christmas, in the little town of Bethlehem, Jesus was engaged in missionary work. He was the world's first Christian missionary.** We often give that title to Apostle Paul, but really it belongs to Jesus. He's the first to cross cultural barriers to reach a lost people doomed in their sin and darkness. He's the first to contextualize the good news of God into a language and grammar that's understandable to a foreign people in a foreign land. The Son of God became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
 - ▶ *Have you ever thought about Christmas that way?* It helps you look at it from a new angle, and hopefully draw out new applications especially related to missions. That's our plan as we're leading up to CMC, which is less than ten days away. If you're not familiar, **Chinese Mission Convention** is a gathering of Chinese churches focused on equipping and unleashing people to be on mission for God's global glory. As a church we've got almost 200 signed up. And to prepare our hearts for both Christmas and the Convention, we're tying those two themes together as we study our passage.

- ❖ **It feels a bit cheeky to call Jesus' earthly ministry a missions trip. But in a sense, that's what it was.** So in keeping with this metaphor, I'd like to offer three words that encapsulate the essence of Jesus' missionary work, which ought to set a pattern for ours. The three words are humility, presence, and witness.

Humility

- ❖ The first word is humility. **The work of a missionary requires a willingness to humble ourselves.** And that's what we see exemplified in Jesus in v14. Look at it with me, "*And the Word became flesh*". Now we need to recall what we said a few weeks ago, when we were studying v1. The Greek word for Word is *logos*. We said it was philosophical term frequently discussed among ancient Greeks. It could also be translated as Reason or Logic.
 - ▶ **The *Logos* was understood to be the underlying reason or logic behind life.** Behind everything. This immaterial principle was believed to be the very thing holding together everything in the universe. It's like the Force in *Star Wars*. **The *Logos*, to ancient Greeks, was like the Force minus the magical elements.** The similarity lies in that the Force and the *Logos* are both understood to be the animating principle in and behind everything.

- ❖ The Apostle John knows this. And like a good missionary he contextualizes in order to speak the language of his audience. So instead of starting his Gospel with a birth narrative, he jumps straight into a philosophical debate. He says I'm going to write about the *Logos*. In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. That was v1.
 - ▶ **And now in vv14-18, John makes an emphatic claim that the *Logos* is not some immaterial, impersonal principle but a material, personal person.** He has a name. It's Jesus (v17). And this Jesus, this *Logos*, became flesh.

- ❖ John's word choice here is intentional. He didn't say the Word became a man (*anthropos*). Or the Word became a body (*soma*). **He chose the word flesh (*sarx*).** **Whenever you see that word in Scripture, it carries a connotation of creatureliness.** Flesh emphasizes our creaturely frailty in contrast to the Creator's imperishable nature (cf. Isa. 40:6).
 - ▶ This is significant. If you read the old Greek mythologies, you'll see examples of Zeus or Apollos becoming an *anthropos* (man) or taking on a *soma* (body). But in those cases, they were only appearing in human form or only slipping into a human body like a costume. They were never said to have become *sarx* (flesh). That would've been way too crass for a divine being.

- ❖ But that's exactly what John is claiming about the Son of God. The Word became flesh doesn't mean Jesus slipped into a human body that he can take on or off (see Docetism). **He wasn't masking his divine glory behind flesh. No, the Incarnation says he actually laid aside his glory to become flesh.**
 - ▶ Jesus is the Second Person of the Godhead. In the beginning, he was with God the Father and he was God himself. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. **God is one being who eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** Each person is fully God and fully possess the glory of God.
 - And yet in becoming flesh, the Son laid aside that glory. That's why he prays later in **John 17:5** asking the Father to, "*glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*"

- ❖ **So Jesus shared a glory with the Father before the world existed.** But he laid that glory aside in the Incarnation. That doesn't mean he laid aside his divinity. In becoming flesh, he didn't become less God. There was no subtraction in him. Just an addition of a human nature. So within the one person of Jesus there were now two natures: one fully divine and one fully human. He is God in the flesh.
 - ▶ **So to lay aside his divine glory is not to say he laid aside his divinity. It means he humbled himself.** He took on humanity, but not as if it were just a shell. In becoming flesh, his divine nature was united perfectly and eternally with a human nature. From that moment on into eternity, the Son of God will always have a human body.

- ❖ **Ancient Greeks would've considered that absurd.** They held to a dualistic worldview where the material world, where matter itself including the human body, was considered evil and undesirable. Salvation in their conception was to escape the body, this shell imprisoning the real me, the soul. So they couldn't imagine that the immaterial *Logos* of life would actually become a material being. That it would have a human body. That's absurd!
 - ▶ **John's Jewish audience would've fared no better with this teaching.** They were expecting God to send the Messiah, the Christ. But they weren't expecting the Incarnation. The Jewish worldview emphasized the transcendence of Yahweh God. There was a sharp and stark line drawn between the Creator and creation. So to speak of a union of the two would've been considered blasphemous.

- ❖ **My point is this: If you have a hard time believing the miracle of the Incarnation, you're not alone.** John's Greek and Jewish audience were in the same boat. If Christmas is just a myth, if it's just a story concocted to convince ancient people that Jesus was more than a man, then John is doing a poor job. This won't sell in ancient times or modern – if we're just selling a story.
 - ▶ But of course that's not what John is doing. He's speaking truth. I think the difficulty in believing this miracle actually strengthens the argument that John is speaking truth and not just concocting a believable, captivating story.

- ❖ The Incarnation is hard to believe. As it should be. We're talking about the Creator of the Universe. "*All thing were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*" (v3) **He deserves all glory, honor, and praise. And yet when he came into the world, it wasn't with pomp and pageantry.** There was no royal red carpet reception. Instead he was born in a lowly inn and laid in a manger.
 - ▶ Knowing the way monarchs with absolute power and authority behave themselves, it would be shocking to imagine that any of them would be willing to lay aside their glory and humble themselves so.
 - But that's Jesus. **We're told in Philippians 2 that he didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped.** But he made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:6-7).

- ❖ **And the irony of that is that “equality with God” was exactly what Adam tried to grasp in the Garden.** He was tempted to be like God (Gen. 3:5). For that, he incurred a curse that was passed down to every generation, to every person, in every people group on the earth. **We’re all guilty of trying to be like God, to be the god or goddess of our lives.** So the curse is on each of us. It’s the curse of death, of the body and the soul (cf. Rom. 6:23).
 - ▶ So this means the Incarnation is not just a means for the Son of God to identify with his people. To identify with our suffering and pain. It’s true that he does. **But Jesus humbles himself and becomes flesh – not just to identify with us – but to rescue us.** The Last Adam came to do the opposite of the First Adam. He laid aside his glory to take on our sins and take up a cross. *“Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* (Phil. 2:8)

- ❖ So humility is the first word summing up Jesus’ earthly ministry, his missions trip. But before we move to the next word, I want to stress that Jesus’ humility in the Incarnation is not just a great example for us when considering missions.
 - ▶ **His humility is the very basis for our hope and salvation.** It’s at the foundation of the good news we have to share to all the unreached peoples of the earth. We’re born into Adam and under his curse. **Our only hope of salvation is to be born again into the Second Adam, into Christ who bore the curse for us.**

- ❖ Church, that’s the gospel message we’re commissioned to take to the ends of the earth. And we’re called to do so with Christ-like humility. With a willingness to lay aside our privileges, our glory. With a readiness to make yourself nothing. To take on the form of a servant. If you go to the mission field with any other aim, you’re doing it wrong. **The missionary takes his cue from the Incarnation.**

Presence

- ❖ So the first word is humility. The second is presence. **The work of a missionary requires your presence among the people.** That’s why if we want to make any lasting impact among the unreached people groups of the world, short-term missions trips are not enough. Dropping in for a week or two to do missionary work has its value.
 - ▶ **But the kind of missionary work that Jesus modeled calls for a willingness to leave the relative comfort and safety of your home to dwell among a lost people in dark land.** This is why I have so much respect for long-term missionaries.

- ❖ They’re following in the footsteps of Christ. It says in v14 that, *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* That word for dwelt (*skenoo*) literally means to pitch one’s tent. The Greek OT uses a derivative of that word to describe the tabernacle (cf. Ex. 25:9, LXX). During Israel’s wilderness years, the tabernacle was that tent pitched in the center of camp, and that’s where the Shekinah glory of the LORD would come down and rest (cf. Ex. 40:34). The tabernacle is where Moses would meet with God. It was God’s presence in their midst.

- ❖ Like I said, John is choosing his words carefully. **In saying the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, he's comparing the Incarnate body of Christ to the Tabernacle.** He does something similar in chapter 2 comparing Jesus' body to the Temple (cf. Jn. 2:21).
 - ▶ His point is clear: In the OT, God took up residence among his people – at first in a hide-covered tent and then in a brick-laid temple. But now he's come even closer and in a much more intimate way. He's come as a flesh-and-blood person.

- ❖ John goes on to say in v14 that in this new Tabernacle, in the flesh of Jesus, *"we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."* This is a pretty amazing statement. **It's saying that even though he laid aside his glory to become flesh, there's still a glory to be seen when you look at Jesus with eyes of faith.**
 - ▶ When you look at the OT tabernacle it was just a tent made of animal hide. There were no decorations or adornments on it. There was nothing glorious about it. But that's where you're wrong. In the seemingly humble and ordinary, great glory rested.

- ❖ So this is what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who looks at Jesus and sees more than a man. More than a good teacher. More than a social reformer. More than a religious leader. **A Christian is someone whose eyes of the heart have been opened, so she looks at Jesus and sees glory.** The glory of the invisible God.

- ❖ We're told in v18 that no one has ever seen God. In the OT, Moses is said to have come the closest. There's this place in Exodus 33 where Moses is pleading with God for a chance to see his glory. *"Please show me your glory."* (v18) To that request the LORD replies, *"I will make all my goodness pass before you."* (v19) So God's glory consists of his divine goodness.
 - ▶ But then the LORD warns, *"But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."* So when the time comes for God to pass by Moses, he shields the prophet's eyes, and only gives him a glimpse of his backside. That's as close as anyone got.

- ❖ Throughout the OT, people were terrified of seeing God (Ex. 3:6; Judg. 13:21-22; Isa. 6:5). They would fall down as dead. **Seeing God is like looking directly at the sun. It'll burn your eyes. It's dangerous.** You shouldn't do it – unless you have a filter. If you use a filter, then you get to see the brilliance of the sun in all its glory.

- ❖ John is essentially saying that Jesus is that filter. Look to Jesus and you'll see God's glory full of grace and truth. *"For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily"* (Col. 2:9). **John's point is that the glory revealed to Moses when the LORD passed before him, was the very same glory John and his friends saw when they looked at the Word-made-flesh.**
 - ▶ This is the good news of Christmas. With the birth of a baby boy, everything changes. Now we get to see God in a way unparalleled to the saints of old. They saw God's glory and fell down as if dead. **But now on this side of Christmas, we receive new life and have our eyes open to see the same glory – but in its fullness.**

- ❖ Look at v16. "*For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*" To receive grace upon grace suggests a succession of grace. It can also be translated "*grace instead of grace*". **That implies an old grace being replaced by a new grace.**
 - ▶ And what might that be? The answer is in v17, "*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" **So the grace given through Moses (in his case, the Law of God) has been replaced by the new grace that comes through Jesus Christ.**

- ❖ So think about that. **The Law is actually a means of grace.** Now be honest, does it feel like grace to you? *When you read the Law of God, when you consider its commands and demands, do they sound like grace or a burden? If the Law feels like a burden to you, like a heavy yoke, you're reading it all wrong.* The Law is grace to you.
 - ▶ The Law is not bad. It's just not enough. It's not sufficient to reveal God. **You don't see the fullness of God's glory in the Law. For that you need Christ in the gospel.** Saving grace and saving truth only come through Jesus Christ.

- ❖ That's the reason he came. That's the reason he became flesh and pitched his tent among us. That's why he moved into the neighborhood. Christ lived among us. He was present among us. So that in his presence, we might see more of God. More of God's glory. More of God's fullness. More of God's grace and truth.
 - ▶ Friends, that's what missions aims to do. **That's why we need more missionaries to pitch their tent among the unreached peoples of the world.** To bring the presence of God near in the person of Christ, through the message of Christ, the gospel.

- ❖ One of my prayers lately is that through events like CMC and through the weekly preaching of the Word from this pulpit – that God might raise up and call out more of us to go both across the sea and across the street. To step out of our relative safety and comfort and make our dwelling among the lost.

Witness

- ❖ Humility and presence. May those words describe us and our engagement with our community and with our world. Now our third and last word is witness. **The work of a missionary requires witnessing to the truth.** Jesus, as the first missionary, excels in this.
 - ▶ Look at v18, "*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*" That word for "made him known" is the word *exegeomai*. It's where we get the word *exegete*. When we speak of exegeting a passage of Scripture, it means to properly interpret it. To draw out its meaning. To disclose its mysteries.

- ❖ **So at the end of v18 it says the Son exegeted the Father.** He interpreted God for us. So we wouldn't even know God rightly without the Son. Without him humbling himself, becoming flesh, making his dwelling among us, and witnessing to the truth about the Father. Jesus exegetes God for us.

- ❖ **There's been a lot of discussion in the past week or so about whether or not Christians, Jews, and Muslims actually worship the same God.** The latest debates were triggered by a professor at a prestigious evangelical college who made a public statement about Christians and Muslims worshipping the same God.¹ And recently the Vatican put out a statement about how the Church should no longer evangelize Jews.²
 - ▶ There are similarities between these monotheistic faiths, and we should be quick to affirm what we theologically share in common. But the central question comes down to this: *Are Jews and Muslims letting Jesus exegete God? Are they listening to his interpretation of who God is?* If not, then we're listening to entirely different voices.

- ❖ **As a Christian, I privilege Jesus' voice and his testimony because he's unique in who he is and where he comes from, in comparison to all other prophets.** Whether we're talking about the prophet Moses (revered by Jews) or the prophet Mohammed (revered by Muslims).
 - ▶ Only Jesus is said to be at the Father's side (v18). The old translations say from "*the bosom of the Father*". **That means Jesus not only brings testimony about God. He's the only one bearing eyewitness testimony.** In the OT, there were plenty of witnesses called prophets who were sent by God to God's people. But none of them were ever sent from the Father's side.
 - Prophets were simply given words to repeat. They would go about saying, "*Thus says the Lord*". But none of them could say, ***Thus I have seen with my own eyes in heaven and heard with my own ears in glory.*** Only Jesus can say that. Moses and Mohammed would never dare make that claim. They would consider that blasphemy. But that's why I'm fascinated by Jesus.

- ❖ But we know he's more than just an eyewitness of God. **The main point today is that Jesus is God Incarnate.** He is God made flesh. And again, no one else makes this claim. **Moses and Mohammed only claim to speak the truth, but Jesus claims to be the Truth.** A living Truth made personal so that anyone who receives him, by faith, can know God personally.
 - ▶ In John 14, Philip and the other disciples ask Jesus to show them the Father. It was like Moses asking, "*Please show me your glory.*" Let me read to you **John 14:8-10**, "⁸*Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.'* ⁹*Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?' ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?'*"

- ❖ That's a pointed question for each of us. **Do you believe that Jesus uniquely shows you God?** That Jesus and the Father are one? (Jn. 10:30) If you consider yourself a spiritual seeker, someone very open faith, if you want to see God for yourself – you don't have to climb some mountain or accomplish some mighty feat. God has come down to you, and he accomplished a mighty feat for you on the cross.

¹ See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/december/wheaton-college-hijab-professor-same-god-larycia-hawkins.html>

² See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december-web-only/orthodox-rabbis-and-vatican-exchange-olive-branches.html>

- ❖ Friend, if you came in here this morning seeking God, I hope your search is over. I pray God grants you new eyes so you can see Jesus for who he really is. Full of the Father's glory. Full of grace and truth. Go ahead, ask Go to show you his glory. Ask him to show you his Son.

- ❖ **Church, the reason I conclude with an emphasis on Jesus being the only one to properly exegete God is because our witness is urgently needed among the remaining unreached people groups of the world** (lacking a self-led, self-propagating church). And the vast majority of them live in what's known as **the 10/40 window**. A region that belongs primarily in the eastern hemisphere located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. That includes Saharan and Northern Africa, the Middle East, India, China, and Southeast Asia.
 - ▶ *And guess what the dominant worldview and religion is for a large portion of this part of the world?* Islam. According to one source, there are an estimated 1 billion Muslims in this 10/40 window who are considered unreached. **One billion people who have never seen God and who will never see God – unless they hear the witness of the only God, who is at the Father's side, who has made God known.**