

Jesus' Gifts: Grace and Truth

[John 1:14-18](#)

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Would you like to know what Jesus got you for Christmas this year? Well, I can tell you that. It is the same thing he has been giving people since the very first Christmas the gifts of grace and truth. The best news is that he brought these gifts to you, in the flesh.

This has not been an easy week. After the UN inspectors were again prevented from performing their duties, and after overwhelming evidence that Iraq was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, our country and Great Britain began sustained air strikes on Baghdad. Most of us feel we were left with no choice. All of us are overwhelmed with sadness that innocent people will lose their lives. Even after the air strikes are over, no one expects much will change there. When it comes to places like Iraq, nobody has a word of hope.

Yesterday the House of Representatives impeached the President. Some of us believe that action was necessary. Some of us do not. People on both sides of this issue are angry, if not cynical. Like many of you, I have listened to a lot of speeches in the last few weeks. Many on both sides of the aisle spoke with passion and intelligence. But we are so divided now. No one seems to have the word that can unite the country.

As a pastor, I spent a lot of time this week with people in crises of their own. I went to the hospital to be with a family in our church because the father was just diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. A mother came to see me whose daughter is dying. An expectant mother also came to see me who just learned that the baby she is carrying is badly deformed. A young husband called me whose wife died the night before. All of them were looking for a word from their pastor. They just wanted a word that could make sense of all this brokenness.

Now we have come to church, less than a week away from Christmas. And if you have been paying attention to the events in the world, in our country, and in the lives of the people of our church, you have to be wondering, "What about God? What does he have to say? Does God have a word for us?" I began this week, thinking this was a terrible time for all these awful events to be taking place. It is so close to Christmas. But I now believe this is the best time of the year to handle crises, because this is the time when we are clearest about God's Word to a dark and despairing world.

Our text today reminds us that God's word did not come as advice or as easy answers. It did not come as either political or theological rhetoric. No, instead we are told, "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth." The Word became flesh.

Notice, John did not say that God's word became a human, or even a man, but flesh. Flesh is such an earthy term. Is it not because we are people of flesh that wars break out, and countries become divided? It seems like most of our problems in this life are caused by the flesh. Isn't it the flesh that gets tempted? Isn't it the flesh that gets diseased, and deformed, and dies? Isn't it because we have hearts of flesh that they break so easily, and leave us so lonely at Christmas?

The last word we were expecting from God is that he would become flesh. Frankly, what we were hoping is that he would tell us something that would deliver us from our own struggles with the flesh. The church has always been tempted to tell people exactly that. One of the first heresies to break out in the early church was Docetism. The Docetists had no trouble affirming the divinity of Jesus Christ, but they could not believe that the Son of God could also be fully human flesh. Because to say that God became flesh is to claim that our hope will have to be found in this life. And to that objection, the Apostle John, says, "Right. That is exactly right." Just as Christ was with God at the beginning of creation, pushing aside the darkness and chaos to create light and beauty, so was he with us, in the flesh, pushing the dark chaos of our own making. It is the only Word that can save us.

Over the last couple of months I have gathered together several very smart people in our church who are interested in the church's relationship to society. I gave them a bunch of books to read. And then kept posing the question, "How can the church talk to our confused society in a way that will help and inspire, and offer leadership, without using a lot of church-talk?" We have looked hard at some of the best and brightest written responses to that question. But I have almost concluded that at some point, if we're really going to be of help to our society, we still have to talk about Jesus. It is not enough to keep saying "We have to be religious or spiritual. We have to return to good values." Because we can't do it. We cannot be good on our own. We need a Savior. We need to be saved from others, and we need to be saved from ourselves.

Of course, as we soon as we say that, we are labeled as being sectarian. Well, fine. Our calling is not to run around the Titanic wishing everyone an inoffensive "Happy Holidays." Our calling is to point to the saving word we have been given. I am not saying we have to convert to being Presbyterians, or even Christians for that matter. Today being Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, has become a sociological description, if not a political one. I'm not calling us to point people to our religion. I'm calling us to point people to Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh that lived among us.

This term, "lived among us" or as some of our translations say "dwelled among us" is fascinating. In the Greek, the word is *skēnōn* which is a derivative of the Hebrew word *shekinah*, as in God's *shekinah* glory. In the Old Testament, it was only the High Priest who could enter the Tent of Meeting, or later the Holy of Holies in the Temple, to encounter the *shekinah* glory of God. But John is telling us that Jesus Christ is now the meeting place, that dwells among us, where all mortal flesh can encounter God's glory. This week we could have used a few more encounters with something, anything, glorious.

The ancients believed that if an ordinary person like you or me ever saw the glory of God it would kill them, because it meant that God was coming to judge them for their sins. But the Word we get on God from Jesus is that he has come not to judge you but to save you. The miracle we are celebrating on Christmas Eve is that in looking upon Jesus, "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the father's son," and it did not kill us! Do you understand the message of Christmas? God is not out to get you! That was never what your suffering, or your broken heart, or the chaos in our society was about. The world is dark because we have made it so, not God. Yes, God knows our sins, and frailty, and that is exactly why we were given a Savior.

But remember, God's Word to us is a Savior in the Flesh. He walked our roads in life. He felt our hunger and our loneliness. He cried the tears of those who grieve deeply. He knew all about injustice and betrayal. Jesus was a man of sorrows, well acquainted with our grief. But he was also well acquainted with our joy. He had friends he dearly loved. He delighted in children, and dinner parties, and wedding receptions with lots of wine. He loved most of all to introduce people to the healing power of God. In Jesus, you have a Savior who knows all about the highs and lows of your life because he lived it all. But the Son of God did not come into the world just to keep us company. He came to bring us back home to the Father. While he was here, he brought two gifts with him that will help us find our way. These are the gifts that could only have been left by a Savior in the Flesh. In fact, this Savior gave up his life to purchase these gifts for us.

John tells us these are the gifts of grace and truth. The truth is that we have lost our way trying to find a little glory on our own. Along the way we committed sins of commission and sins of omission. We hurt others and we hurt ourselves. The world is dark today, because we have each turned out the lights. We deserve exactly the world we have created for ourselves, and that is the truth. But the grace is that God will not give us what we deserve. He insists on giving us what we need -- forgiveness. These gifts of grace and truth are interrelated. We cannot have one without the other. The truth is too much to bear without the grace. The grace is sheer pettiness without encountering the truth. The more grace we receive, the easier it is to handle the truth. The better we get at telling the truth, the more delicious grace we receive. And grace is our only ticket back home to the Father.

How do these Christmas gifts of grace and truth help our darkened world and our frightened lives? Well, like any gift, it draws you to the giver. When you open a present under the tree this Christmas, it isn't really the present that warms your heart, but the person who gave it. The amazing costly gifts of grace and truth draw us to the giver, Jesus Christ. The more of his gifts you receive, the more in love with him you will become. Pretty soon the love will change your life. Before you know it, the love of Christ will start flowing from you to others. Then, you too are changing the world with the words of grace and truth. You may even become Christ's gifts of grace and truth to our world. And that is the only way we will get the lights back on in our world.

Heavenly Father, as your Son once left heaven's threshold and stepped across the stars to a manger, bring him also into our hearts that we too may behold his glory, full of grace and truth. Amen.