

Isaiah 9:2-7

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-7

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Testify to Incarnate Love

So the children have gone downstairs to get ready for the Christmas pageant, so now I want you to reminisce. Close your eyes and think back to when *you* were a child and how magical Christmas was. Think about the Christmas tree and all the shiny, glittery ornaments, the smell of the pine, the greens, the red, the gold. Think about the smell of the meat roasting, of the cookies and pies that were baking. Think about fun of playing out in the snow, and coming inside and having a cup of hot cocoa. Think of the sounds, the carolers, the songs, the hymns. Best of all, think about *all those presents* under that tree on Christmas morning, the anticipation of opening that box that you're pretty sure is the Major Matt Mason Space Exploration set, complete with moon walker and command module. Okay, so maybe that wasn't the toy you were hoping to get, but think of that special toy or doll or whatever it was. And think of those first few hours of utter bliss playing with that toy, and then open your eyes, come back to reality. Boy, that felt good!

Now let me ask you; how did Jesus fit into all that? He really didn't, did he? I mean, we celebrate his birthday, but we're the ones who get the presents. And, I don't know about you, but church was not something I was really excited about at Christmas; oh, it was nice enough with its Christmas tree and its candles and nice songs, but I really wanted to get home and open presents, or if I had already opened them, I wanted to get home and *play* with my presents. Church was just a requirement, kind of like eating my Brussels sprouts at dinner; you had to do it in order to get dessert, or to get excused from the table so you could go play with your toys or go outdoors or whatever. Even though Christmas was about Baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem and all the angels and shepherd and wise men, it was mainly about the presents.

And while I say that we've completely lost our Christian bearing, especially in a year where Christmas Day falls on a Sunday and we're likely to have *fewer* people in church because of that, I'm not going to say it's your fault. I'm going to say it's my fault, that it's the Church's fault, for not demonstrating the full value of God's gift to us in Jesus Christ. That's right; it's the church, or rather, many churches, that have failed in leading their congregations to appreciate just how important the incarnation really is.

It's like many have completely missed the point of the incarnation, of God coming to us in the flesh. That's what the incarnation was. God with us in the flesh, living, eating, laughing, breathing, suffering and dying ***with us, for us***. God eliminated the distance between him and us, and it seems we have been trying to put more space between us.

For example, we think of God strictly as a spirit, even though Jesus came as a human being, walked as a human being, suffered and died as a human being, and resurrected as a human being. So now many preachers preach and many Christians believe that when we die, our spirit leaves our bodies and goes to heaven to be with God, who is a spirit. What would be the point of Jesus coming as flesh and blood if we're all just going to end up as spirits? What's the point of the resurrection if we ourselves are not destined to come back in body? At the beginning of this sermon I had you close your eyes and reminisce about Christmas past, and all those memories that brought you such joy involved your senses, involved your body. When you think about it the things that matter most to us are things that relate to our physical bodies, to our

life here. I don't think spirits can appreciate the flavor of one of Dottie Baker's cranberry almond coffee cakes. I don't think a spirit can enjoy a child's hug. To use a rather stark example, if your spouse is spending a lot of time talking with an attractive colleague from work, or having a "spiritual" relationship with that person, you may be resentful, but if your spouse has a "physical" relationship with that person, you'll be a bit more than resentful; you'll be outraged!

And the point of the incarnation is that God affirms this physical world. He doesn't want to just transport some part of us called our spirits to another dimension; he plans to establish his kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven; that's why Jesus came as a human, that's why he lived and died as a human, and that's why he was *resurrected* as a human, to assure us of eternal life with all its physical qualities.

Which is why it is important to us to affirm this world as we affirm the Baby Jesus on Christmas, because God is not merely "out there;" God is right here in our midst. Jesus came to initiate God's kingdom on earth, and inasmuch as you have heard the message of Jesus and about Jesus, and inasmuch as that message has affected you, you have been summoned to bring forth that kingdom. Christianity is not just a bunch of rules designed to make you more "spiritual" – there are plenty of other religions that will help you do that. Christianity is about a new way of living, under Christ's lordship. It's about loving God as we love others. It's about loving this good earth and caring for it. Most of all it's about celebrating the fact that God is with us, and that someday all that grieves us, all that hurts us, all the suffering and all the pain, all that is evil and leads to wars and injustice, even death itself will end, and God's kingdom will be fully established on earth as it is in heaven.

So celebrate this incarnation, because it's God's expression of his love for us. Jesus comes in the flesh to show us how important we are to God, how precious we are. He comes to show us God's plan for life eternal in him. And that is something really worth celebrating.