

“What Child Is This?”
Based on John 1:14
Preached on Christmas Eve 2020

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

In the Name of the virgin born and Prince of Peace, dear and treasured friends this Christmas Eve,

It was the year 1979, when a high school group in communist east Germany was visiting the building of one of our sister congregations over there – that was long before the reunification with the West. And the host pastor was serving as something of a tour guide for this thing, and in some detail he was explaining all the architecture history of the building, when suddenly in the middle of the tour, quite unexpectedly, one of the students pointed out an object hanging over the altar in the front of the room – it was a crucifix – one of the crosses that has on it the image of the dying Jesus.

Anyway, the student wanted to know as he pointed – who is that supposed to be? Is that Spartacus? I don’t know if you ever heard of Spartacus, but I’ll give you the quick Coles notes version. Spartacus was the leader of a bunch of rebels back in the days of the Roman empire. And we don’t know at all how he died, but we do know a bunch of his rebel followers got crucified.

So now you stand back and take a look at this whole tour scene that I've just described to you. These were academic students, well-read, quite bright, every single one bound for university and yet in seeing an image of the dying Christ the one student didn't know what he was looking at because his thoughts went immediately to a rebel from years ago.

Now there was likely a good reason for that. You see, communist east Germany was still going strong in 1979. They had a government that tried to suppress Christian preaching and they wouldn't permit very much religious influence in the public school system. And I'm quite sure that a lot of these high school kids had parents who had been taught something about Jesus earlier in their lives, but they had decided they were not going to say anything to their kids about it because it might complicate their lives in an atheistic country like that. So now what was the result?

The result was that, the crucifix, which is recognized by believer and non-believers all over the world, was unrecognizable to them, yes, some of these kids didn't have a clue.

Tonight, in songs and readings, you're not standing at that spot, looking at an image of the dying Jesus, but together with literally hundreds of millions of Christian people on this Christmas Eve all over the world you're standing at a very different place. You're watching an infant wriggling on the straw of a cow's lunch box, because that what's a manger really was – but even though it's a different spot – you could borrow the question from that old east German high school student – who is that

supposed to be? Or I guess if you wanted to, you could borrow the first line from that carol we just sang – “What Child Is This?” The fact is a great many people don’t really know any more. Even if our Canadian society and the families in it are not sworn enemies of the Christian faith the way they were in east Germany. The fact is the people around us are focusing less and less on Jesus Christ.

I remember seeing once, on the front page of the paper, a big picture, you know, of an excited child, her arms reached out joyfully, wrapped around Santa’s big belly, and it had the big headline – “embracing the season”.

You see there is plenty of attention given to Christmas and to the season and to the foods and to the concerts and to the travel and to the good deals you can get – and all the rest of it – there is no shortage of talking about Christmas, but there is a deadly shortage of attention to Jesus. So people don’t ask, and if they do ask, sometimes like that east German school kid, they don’t really know. And again like that kid who honestly mistook Jesus for Spartacus, people just run ahead with all their own ideas about all this.

Dear ones I’m hear to tell you that who Jesus Christ is and what He has done and what He offers is absolutely the most urgent thing in all of life that you could ask about. And certainly, it is the most valuable thing you could ponder on Christmas Eve if you don’t want this to just be a season where you pack the customs away very soon for another year. People may not

exactly know who this child is. And it might even be sometimes that it goes a little fuzzy in your head and mine. But in this single verse I have just read from John's Gospel book, God Himself tells you.

You know we have at least three different Christmas stories in the Bible. And all of them are very, very valuable. St. Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view. That wounded young man who was engaged to be married and then found out his fiancé was expecting a child despite the fact that he knew he had nothing to do with it. And the story explained also how the angel spoke into his confusion and pain. Then St. Luke in his book reports the whole thing, on the other hand, from Mary's side. A teenage girl who is startled one day out of the blue by an angel who tells her, like it or not, ready or not, she's going to conceive in her own body and bear the rescuer of the human race.

And tonight now we are hearing from the third holy writer- that's St. John – who reports this whole miracle from God's own point of view. Here's how John gives you the Christmas news flesh – the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us – now that might not sound like much, but that statement is absolute dynamite – because you see, there is a gap between God and you – in case you haven't noticed – God is holy and we are sinful – He dwells in the highest heavens and we're all stuck down here – and the result is you can't reach through the clouds, you can't really find him, and you can't figure out what He's up to. But the Bible's message from beginning to end is how God Himself in love bridges the gap – how He

reaches down – how He breaks through – and how God speaks a Word to us.

He spoke a Word already when time began – Let there be light, He said – and He put everything into place by means of a Word – and He uses words even now to keep it going – the Bible says that too – He sustains all things by the Word of His power – But God’s Word is not just the sound of a voice that you hear – and God’s Word is not just a few ink letters printed on a page or something – but when the time was exactly right, as far as God is concerned, He wrapped His Word in a human body and sent Him down to all the world – and that is what St. John is reporting in this text. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Folks, He is talking about Christmas. God’s eternal Word took on human flesh, conceived in the womb of Mary a young Jewish girl of marriageable age, and when her nine months were up, this Word made flesh entered our world, a real baby, born in a real town that you can still find on a map.

They laid it on straw because his parents were far, far away from their home on the night that He showed up. And they gave Him the name Jesus – because the angel had told His father Joseph before He was ever born that He was to call His name Jesus - in their language that meant Savior child - because He’s going to save His people from their sins. This infant Jesus is God’s Word made flesh.

Like all words this Word made flesh tells you things. What does it say that the God who lives far away in the highest heavens – chose – to come

down here and be close to you and me sinful human beings? What does it say – that the little Christ was ready already as a baby, to be threatened and hunted down by Herod's soldiers and still didn't turn and run right back to His comfortable safe place on high? What does it say, that Jesus later when He was grown up as a preacher, laid it on the line about human sin and told people the truth that it's capable from separating you from God forever, but at the same time didn't leave His people all hopeless like that but pointed out the way that you can be forgiven and set free? What does it say that Jesus was willing to be tortured and put to death in the prime of His young manhood for things He never did? What does it say that hanging on His cross He never hurled insults or threats at the people that were torturing Him, but instead He prayed to God that He would forgive and not hold their sins against them?

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. He took up residence here in our world, for more than thirty years so that He could say all these kinds of things to needy people and not just by what He spoke, but also by everything that He did, by every way that He ever helped, and also by every bitter thing He endured when He suffered, bled and died. What does it say that His death was not the end of the story because on the solemn third day He was raised from the dead by the glory of His Father?

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father.

St. John who wrote all of this down didn't make up a bit of it. He's simply reporting to us what He saw as an eyewitness. He saw these things happen. And He wants you to know that God's greatest glory is not in a glowing sunset, and its not in a majestic mountain range, its not in a thundering waterfall, its not in the beauty of birds or animals or trees or flowers or any of those things, though they are certainly attractive in their own way. But God's great glory is there for you in the face of this little Savior child. And His great glory is there for you in the simple faith of this God-man who came to show you the way to the Father. But He did way more than that – He came to actually buy and win and offer you the love that sets you on that way that takes you back to God again.

We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

That means that Bethlehem's little Christ is bringing a whole big box of Christmas treasures with Him. The treasures that you need most of all. It says here He is full of grace and truth. Grace is kind of a technical term in the Bible. That stands for undeserved love. And Jesus is full of it. He is full of undeserved love. He doesn't offer you just a little bit of it , you know, to cover this little sin or that little failure of yours. And He doesn't bring you temporary undeserved love, you know, the kind that you get from that certain kind of people, who will love you and will hang in with you a little bit, until you've disappointed them once too often. He is full of grace. Full of undeserved love for you. He presses into your hand a pardon letter that

covers everything you have ever done to thwart the will of God in the world. And everything you have ever done or thought or said that hurt other people along the way.

You stop and think about the pile of it, that you and I have built up in our lifetimes, and you think “all of it” – “all of it” – is blotted out and cancelled and forgiven by the life He lived and the death He died. He came from the Father full of grace and truth.

Truth comes along with the grace that this little Christ brings into our world. Because you take from Him the forgiving grace of God, you now are free to face the truth about yourself and your failings. And free also to understand how deep your needs truly are.

This Christ child also comes to show you the truth about how God really feels towards you. That above everything else He wants to be your redeemer and your helper. In Christ you can see the truth about the joys in this life as well as its sorrows, that neither one of them lasts forever, and so there’s no point being totally enslaved by life’s joys, even though its ok to appreciate them along the way, and there’s little sense in allowing yourself to be completely destroyed by its sorrows, despite the fact that they really can challenge and weary you – especially when you are kept from your loved ones during a pandemic like this.

What child is this? As you stand this night at His manger bed watching shepherds and angels and a lowly father and mother and a newborn laying

on the straw. St. John has told you. This child is God's heaven-sent rescuer. He's the One who is just aching to be believed and trusted. He's the gift of God and He's not just intended for somebody else, or just for the public in general, He's always been given very personally to you.

Whether you have never really grabbed hold of Him before, or even if you did a long time ago and maybe bit by bit along the way you've allowed your own love for Him to fade along the way. This child is held out to you once again this night as your Christ, your Savior, your hope and your life.

Do you remember how that old carol ends on the last verse – I think you do remember it – so bring Him incense gold and myrrh, come peasant king to hold Him, the King of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone Him – and on this holy night I hope yours is one of them. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.