

We Believe: For Us and For Our Salvation He Came Down

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Luke 1:26-38; Nehemiah 9:5-15; John 6:24-40

Our final Scripture reading for the day is John 6:24-40. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Why do we give Christmas presents? I think most of us like Christmas presents, we're not trying to get rid of something we all really enjoy, but I never really stopped to think about why we would give presents at Christmas. We naturally assume, well, we give gifts like the Magi gave gifts to Jesus. But it's not a biblical tradition.

As it turns out, giving gifts to children didn't become a real thing until the 1800s! Before then, sometimes kings required their serfs to give them gifts! In other places, it was a time where the upper classes gave something to their servants. But many times, that was on St. Nicholas Day on December 6, or after the New Year. So why do we give Christmas presents to children? Primarily because of the popularity of the poem "The Night Before Christmas" and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Kind of surprising, isn't it?

But the real issue that I want to get at is, we rarely think deeply about the "why" of things we do, even good things. We give Christmas presents because we want to be seen as good friends, good parents, good people. It's the way things are. But deep down, we don't explore it further. Many things in life are that way. Many habits and patterns and even sins and destructive tendencies come about because we aren't stopping to think about the "why"s of our behaviors.

I wanted to think about that for a moment because our study this week is going to take us into a big “why” – the “why” of why Jesus was incarnate in the Christmas season 2,000 years ago. We’ve been studying the Nicene Creed together; this is our third week examining it during Advent. It’s the one creed that all parts of the Christian church have agreed upon. And after teaching us that Jesus is God and Jesus is our creator, it teaches us this: “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human.”

As we break down the first part of the sentence, there are three things there to think about: Jesus came for *us*. Jesus came for *our salvation*. And to do that, Jesus *came down from heaven*. Each of these is important to understand.

First, Jesus came for *us*. Romans 8 tells us that creation groans and longs to be set free from bondage. Yet Scripture literally only talks about this once. But there are literally dozens of Bible verses that discuss Jesus coming for us. And this speaks to why we worship Jesus and give Him all the glory He deserves – because He values us.

Psalms 8 puts this in perspective. It says, “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.” Despite the gorgeousness of the creation, despite the immensity of the universe, God values us more than all that. God loves us. The Father sent the Son for us. That’s both humbling and awesome.

One of the biggest problems we have in life is defining our worth. The world defines our worth by what we do, the things we’ve accomplished, the number of followers we have on social media. It is no wonder that people are distressed and anxious! The world is in constant judgment mode. We all feel it. As far as the world goes, you’re only worth your last success.

But that isn’t the way God thinks about us. He loves His people. He cares about us. His love for us is so deep that Jesus came for us. That functionally changes how we think about ourselves. If God loves us, we know that we matter. We know that what the world says doesn’t really matter because if God has claimed us, that’s all that matters. Your value comes from your being made by God and made in His image. You have enough value that Jesus came for you. When things are tough, when you feel exhausted and weary, when you doubt your own value, know that Jesus came for you.

Knowing that’s true, we can move on to the next concept: that Jesus came for us and *for our salvation*. Jesus did not just come to experience life on Earth because it seemed fun. He didn’t have a pressing need to become human to see what it was like or even to relate to us – as our maker, He could relate to who He made us to be just fine. But the problem was, we couldn’t relate to Him. The distance between us, carved out by us and our sin, made God unrelatable from our perspective.

This is what we must never lose sight of, that Jesus came down for our salvation. The shadow of the cross looms over the manger. The wise men give gifts fit for a king, yet one of them – myrrh – was commonly used for embalming, and it was used at Jesus' burial. In every single gospel account, Jesus is well aware of His coming death and predicts it well in advance to the disciples. Jesus is on a mission from the beginning of His life, and it is to live a perfect life – a life in perfect harmony with the will of God the Father – so that He can be the perfect person to bring about our salvation through the cross.

When we look at nativity scenes, we feel our heartstrings tugged a bit. There's a certain sweetness to parts of the story as we tell it. And yet, at the same time, we also have to realize that we make this scene necessary. It is our sin and disbelief, our disobedience and disregard for God, that makes it necessary for Christ to leave His throne. He becomes nothing, humbled as a little child, because we need Him to live a perfect life on our behalf, to replace Adam as the head of our race, to save us from sin and death and hell and, in some real way, ourselves.

Often, the season of Lent is when we get serious about what Jesus went through to bring about our salvation. We think about His pain and suffering on the cross and we realize, "My sins took Him to the cross." If we have been spiritually awakened by God, then our desire is to repent, to stop doing the things that nailed Him there. That's right and good.

But if we think about the birth of Jesus theologically, it should also lead us to belief and repentance of our sins. There's no doubt that crucifixion is a terrible death, and Jesus being completely innocent made His death a travesty that revealed both the depths of our sin and the lengths to which Jesus would go to redeem us. But when we think about Jesus, King of the Universe, creator of all things, God the Father's very own Son...to think of Him becoming helpless, reliant on His parents and family for years, humbling Himself to be born to a peasant family, to live in the most backwater part of a backwater place, where the catchphrase was, "Nothing good comes out of Nazareth," it stuns us. His death is just the end of what He did for us. His humble beginnings call us to repent too, because it was our disobedience that required Him to make Himself nothing for our sakes. A proper view of the manger includes not just worship but repentance, a change of heart and mind away from sin and towards Jesus.

And that kind of leads us into the third idea: *he came down from heaven*. This puts such a fine point on it. Jesus came down from His rightful place beside the Father to do what He did. And you know what strikes me? If any of us had done that, we probably would have been like, "Do you know all I gave up for you? You should be pretty thankful, you ungrateful people!" But Jesus was never like that. Jesus spoke about who He is naturally, that His relationship with the Father was just the most natural thing. He didn't guilt people into believing. He set them free from their burdens of sin, free from their sicknesses, free from their pasts, free from all these things that were haunting them, and they followed Him.

The reason we were looking at the readings from Nehemiah and John today were because Jesus uses specific terminology that the Jewish people would have been familiar with when He describes Himself. And that particular terminology is manna. Most of us know that story, but it's always good to have a refresher.

When God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt, they lived in the wilderness between Canaan and Egypt for forty years. In some Bible studies we've done, we've seen pictures of the region – even today, it is a mountainous, barren sort of place where you're just not going to find enough food for the thousands upon thousands of Hebrews that came out of slavery. And so, six days a week for forty years, God provided manna for His people – with a double portion before the Sabbath day of rest. You could gather as little or as much as you wanted, but you always had enough – but if you tried to keep any, it would immediately go bad the next day. God provided what you needed every single day. That manna, we're told, came down from heaven.

In our passage from John, Jesus' listeners want some sort of sign from Him as sort of a proof that He is who He says He is and that they should do what He commands them to do. Now keep in mind, this is directly after Jesus has fed the 5,000 – all of them had a gigantic sign right in front of them already! Isn't that just like us? God does something miraculous for us and we say, yay! Then God asks something difficult of us and we're like, "Um, can we have another sign first just to make sure we should do the hard thing?"

But Jesus says they shouldn't be that concerned with the loaves and fishes He multiplied, or even about the manna that God sent from heaven to their ancestors. They concern themselves with Him, because He is the bread of life who has come down from heaven. The manna their ancestors received was just a foretaste, just a sign, of what was to come. He has come down from heaven to do the Father's will so that all the Father has given Him will be raised up on the last day and given eternal life.

In ancient legends, the gods came down to spy on people, usually in disguise, to punish them for doing evil and to spare them for doing good. But that's what separates out the fantasy from the reality. In the myths, the gods would only appear to be human for a moment, just long enough to see for themselves what was really going on. No god would even think about becoming human for real. But that's what the Nicene Creed says and what Scripture confirms: "he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human."

Jesus' coming down was different. He was enfleshed. He became human. And as He became the God-Man, He will remain for all time. He has His resurrection body even now, as He sits at the right hand of God the Father. It's a perfected body, it's a spiritual body, but it is still human. Jesus will never stop being human. So when Jesus came down, when He became incarnate, He took on humanity permanently. We needed a deliverer with the perfection of God but of our own flesh and blood. So that is what Jesus became when He came down.

One of the earliest heresies in the church was not the belief that Jesus was simply human, like some people are tempted to believe today. Believe it or not, the first major heresy in the church, the first major false belief, was that Jesus only appeared to be human. Because so many people had seen His miracles, and because He did so many of them, there was very little question amongst believers that Jesus was the Son of God. What they had a harder time believing was that Jesus was human. But Jesus did not just wear a human mask to hide His divinity like the old Greek gods did. He came down from heaven. He took on our humanity. He became what He came here to save.

At the start of my sermon, I was talking about the “whys” we so rarely think about – why we give presents at Christmas, why we do some of the things we do. There are all sorts of things that we do that really, our best answer as to why we do them would be, “because.” Why have a ham for Christmas dinner, something Jesus would never have been able to eat as a perfectly practicing Jew? Why do we sing songs about making a snowman and pretending he is Parson Brown? Why does anyone make fruitcake? “Because!”

In comparison, though, Christmas is not a happy accident. Christmas is not God’s last resort. Christ coming down at the perfect time in history has been the will of the Father since before the dawn of time. God knew what He was doing and why He was doing it when He made the Son incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary. In our study of Genesis together this past year, we saw the promises made, that even as Adam and Eve sinned, God promised that one of their descendants would crush the head of the serpent who deceived them. We saw in the story of Abraham and Isaac that God would not require the life of Abraham’s only son...but the Father would send His only Son in his place, to redeem Adam’s helpless race.

For God, the “why” of Christmas is clear and straightforward. Christmas is the moment when the rescue plan takes shape. Christmas is the moment where this plan made in time immemorial happens in real time in a real place. Christmas is when the unthinkable happens – God comes to dwell with man, sharing our world, breathing our air, living as one of us. And as John 3:17 tells us, God sends His Son not to condemn us, but to save us.

When we think on these things, the monumental nature of Christmas becomes apparent. My good friend Vicki and I had a short conversation last week after church about just how mindblowing it is when we think about the infant Jesus being the creator of the universe. And she was right! And all of these things we’re talking about this morning, it’s the same. We cannot truly comprehend the wonder of all Jesus is.

And yet perhaps that’s the point. He is God, He is creator, He is Savior – but He came for us. He came to be in relationship with us. In Jesus, God has a face and eyes and ears and nose. He is cradled in His mother’s arms. Perhaps in some sense He became human because the enormity of who He is is beyond us...but He wanted to know us and be known by us. In Jesus, God is with us.

And when we think about these things, I come back to the same thing time and again: the proper position for us is worship. We cannot earn our salvation so Jesus earns it for us. We cannot rid ourselves of our sin nature so Jesus becomes sin for us and delivers us from it entirely. We deserve hell, so Jesus takes the punishment we deserve so that we can have a place in the Kingdom we don’t deserve. All of these things make us bow before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We can and should talk about living as new creations; we want to live as holy and righteous people to honor the Savior who redeems us. But if we bow our hearts at the manger, then it will be much easier for us to bow our hearts to His will as we follow Him. Today, may we bow in reverence for the One who came with a deep purpose and a perfect motivation – for the One who came down from heaven for us and for our salvation.