

## *Incarnation and the Nativity.*

Probably every profession has its own unique jargon. We who are in the church are no different. Just like doctors and lawyers, accountants and plumbers, we in the church have our own unique vocabulary to describe the things that we're doing and believe. I won't bore you with a long list of terms that would mean absolutely nothing to most of us here, but I will tell you that at this time of year, two terms occupy a prominent place in our theological conversations: Nativity and Incarnation. In fact, this evening we are celebrating (and this is the formal title) "The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ," and the principle that is in operation is what we call the Incarnation. But what in the world are we talking about? you ask me. Let me explain.

Nativity simply means "birth." But we're probably more familiar with some of the variations of this word. For example, we may talk about one's native land, when we're talking about where a person was born. Or we may talk about pre-natal health care, when we're talking about what a pregnant woman might do to ensure the birth of a healthy child. In our present context, however, when we talk about the Nativity, we're talking about the birth of Jesus.

Now, Incarnation refers to the "act of being made flesh." I tried to think of some more familiar variations of this word, but the only thing I could come up with was Carne Asada, a Mexican dish consisting of grilled or roasted meat. (I did recall the term Carnal Knowledge, but that's hardly an appropriate illustration for a Christmas sermon.) In any event, and in this present context, when we are talking about the Incarnation, we are talking about the action whereby God becomes an honest-to-goodness, flesh-and-blood human being.

And what the writers of the gospels — especially Matthew and Luke; Mark and John omit any references to Jesus' birth in their stories — are proclaiming to anyone who will listen to them is that, two thousand years ago, "nativity" and "incarnation" came together in a special way: God took on human flesh and was born into the world of men, in the body of a baby named Jesus.

Now pay close attention, because this is important: the gospel writers simply *proclaim* the birth of Jesus. They never try to describe *how* it happened; they simply say that it *did* happen. And what Christians have been struggling with, since Day One, is the *why* of it all. Why did God become a human being? And that, my friends, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard once wrote a parable to describe the why of the Nativity and Incarnation, and here it is:

*Once upon a time there was a certain king who was very rich. His power and preeminence were known throughout the world. Yet something was missing in his life that kept him unhappy — he desired a wife. Without a queen, the palace was empty.*

*One day, while riding through the streets of a small village, he saw a beautiful peasant girl. So lovely was she that the heart of the king was immediately won. He desired her more than anything he had ever wanted. On succeeding days, he would ride by her house on the mere hope of seeing her for a moment in passing.*

*He wondered how he might win her love. He thought to himself, “I will draw up a royal decree and require her to be brought before me — and then I shall make her the queen of my land!” But as he considered, the king realized that she was a subject and would be forced to obey. He could never be quite sure that he had won her love.*

*Then he said to himself, “I shall call on her in person. I shall dress in my royal garb, wear my jeweled crown, my best rings, my silver sword, and my most colorful tunic. I will overwhelm her with my majesty and position and sweep her off her feet to be cone my bride.” But as he pondered the idea, he knew that he would always wonder whether she had married him for [love, or for] the riches and the power that he could give her.*

*Then he decided to dress as a peasant, drive to town, and have his carriage let him off. In disguise, he would approach her house. But, somehow, the duplicity of this plan did not appeal to him.*

*At last, he knew what he would do. He would shed his royal robes. He would go to the village and become one of the peasants. He would work with them. He would live with them. He would suffer with them. He would actually become one of them. This he did, and in so doing he won his wife.*

In other words (and to paraphrase 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:19), she loved him because he first loved her.

The Nativity and the Incarnation — in other words, Christmas! — was God’s answer to the question How can I get these people to fall in love with me?

I’m sure God though about trying to command us to be in a relationship with him — and maybe that’s a bit of what the Ten Commandments are all about. But being in a relationship with someone, and loving that person, are two very different things.

And I’m sure God considered trying to amaze and astound us into a relationship with him. Look at all that I’ve created, and all that I control, and all that I’ve done. How about that? And that might actually attract a lot of people into relationship with him. But would it necessarily cause them to love God? I don’t know. After all, I’ve watched a lot of magicians in my time, but I’ve never actually loved any of them.

And so, like the king in the parable, God realized that the only way of not only entering into a relationship with us, *and* getting us to love him, was to be one of us. And in the baby Jesus, God was born into the world of men and women. He wasn't just a God in human skin; he was actually one of us. He grew up among us, and had a family just like the rest of us. He learned to work with his hands, and he shared our labors. During the great festivals of the year, he celebrated with us. When a member of the community died, he grieved with us. And when a new member was born into our community, he celebrated with us. And for thirty-three years, *God* was one of us. And because of all this, we knew him, and we loved him. We love him, because he first loved us.

And that, my friends, is the Christmas story. It's a love story. It's the story of how far one person will go, how much one person will do, for another person. And it's a story that tells us that what makes relationships truly special is not what we can get from others, but what we can give to them. And maybe that's why we exchange gifts at Christmas, because it all began with one big gift. God's gift of himself.

In the end, when we talk about Christmas, we can use all the big words we want; words like Nativity and Incarnation. But if we focus on all that jargon, we're likely going to miss the real point of it all: that God loved us so much, that it wasn't enough for him to remain in heaven with us on earth. He came to be with us, to love us, and earn our love for him. But even though Jesus has returned to heaven, his Spirit remains with us, and there's no place where we can go that he isn't already there. And whenever we want to talk to him, he's right there next to us, and he's all ears. And for ever, because of Christmas, not only can we have a relationship with God, but everyday we can renew this grand, divine love affair between God and his people, who once walked side by side.