

*The Story Behind the Story*  
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Christmas Day, 2016

**John 1:1-14**  
**Isaiah 52:7-10**  
**Hebrews 1:1-4**

What a joy it is to gather on Christmas to worship the Christchild. To hear the story again, to praise God for his incomparable gift, to hear his words of peace. We're so glad you are here today. Merry Christmas!

Whether or not you attended worship last night, I'm guessing you know the Christmas story -- which is a composite of the details given to us by the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke. You know: Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem; Mary gives birth in a stable; there are angels and shepherds and wise men and a star. The whole nine yards. It's a wonderful story and it always brings tears to my eyes when I hear it again. Because it's true. It goes straight to the heart.

Because it is Christmas, I thought you might enjoy hearing the story again, but this time told from a child's perspective. It's a clip that's been making the rounds on You Tube, but I thought it might make a good summary for us today. These kids tell it in their own way, and they're pretty good about getting the details straight. Take a look. (Clip)

Well, there you have it. It is an amazing story. And I love the last part: "He's going to change the world." They nailed it. And – whimsy aside – it's absolutely true. All of it: the virgin birth, the angels, the shepherds, and the star. It's the structure on which everything hangs. But today's lesson from the Gospel of John tells it differently. No angels, shepherds or manger; no wise men; no star. It's almost as if he didn't know the details (I mean, did he even know Mary's name?). And it's not that Matthew's and Luke's stories were wrong; but John tells the story behind the story. John goes all cosmic on us. He goes bigger and probes deeper. If the Matthew/Luke story is the narrative, John is the Cliff Notes. It's like the scientist and his wife who made a guest a cup of tea. The scientist explain it like this: "If you ask me, 'Why is the kettle boiling?' I'll tell you about heat and racing molecules and the boiling point of water. But if you ask my wife the same question, she'll say, 'Because I'm making you tea.'" That's the difference: meaning. And purpose. Luke tells you how; John tells you why. It's what is *really* happening -- the story behind the story. It happened *for you*. It's still happening today.

Luke and Matthew begin with genealogies; they begin with Joseph and Mary and their parentage. But John starts at the *very* beginning, before the world even began. Pastor Jim and I recently saw a documentary about Steven Hawking who did a pretty remarkable study into the beginning of time. His theory is that there was not only a Big Bang, but before that, there was absolutely nothing. Nothing; including God. Now, Hawking is an atheist; he sees no room for God in his equation. But John does. When John quotes Genesis, "In the beginning..." he assumes all that follows. In the beginning, says Genesis, "God created." *In the beginning*, John says, *was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God*. John goes to the very beginning, a place before time itself exists, a place that cannot be addressed by math or physics. It's a place that can only be reached by faith – faith in God and in his Word. Faith based on a God who created the world out of love and light. Faith based on the fact that God sent the essence of that love and light – his very self – into history, to this small, troubled planet – to end our darkness.

*Darkness* is an important word here. In John, the "darkness" is not just a matter of night-time. It's not just a matter of the spinning of the earth which gives us night and day. Yes, God created the sun, moon and stars. God separated the day from the night, giving us time for both work and for rest. But for John, *darkness* goes deeper; it's a matter of the heart. *Darkness* is related to sin, doubt, fear – our essential rebellion against God. *Darkness* is the inclination to run from the light and hide. God sent light, John says; but because of sin, many prefer darkness.

Well, God wasn't satisfied with the status quo. You see, God truly does love us, messed up as we are. So he took a step that no one saw coming: God fully entered our world. In the flesh. In the person of Jesus, whom John calls *the Word*. Our reading from Hebrews today tells us that God first sent prophets to reveal his presence and his will. But that wasn't sufficient. Finally, God took the unprecedented step of revealing himself through his Son -- the Son who is "the exact representation of his being." It's like the story of the child whose father had gone to fight in World War II. During his father's absence, his mom would show him a framed picture of his dad every day, as that deployment stretched out to 2, then 3, then 4 years. One day the boy said to her, "Wouldn't it be great if Dad could just step out of the picture frame?" *That's* what God did in Jesus. Jesus is God, in the flesh. He stepped out of the picture frame to live with us. God fully entered our world in Jesus -- "became flesh and dwelt among us," as John says.

When John says that Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, "*dwelt* among us" he uses a Greek word that literally means he "*tented* among us." Those who have fought in the trenches might say, "He's *in bivouac* with us." Jesus experienced all the limitations and struggles that you and I have in this life; he got down into the mud. He's been there. He understands. And here's the good news: the difficulties of this world never overcame him. Neither temptation nor suffering nor even death got the better of Jesus. John puts it this way: *The darkness has not overcome the light.*

But that's not all. If the Incarnation were only a matter of a moment in history when God entered our world, it would not be more than an historical note. It's nice but it changes nothing. But God came to redeem this dark planet, one life at a time. Yours and mine. He came to change us, to give us hope. He not only came to us; he brought us in. He made us *family*. He took us into his intimate circle; he made us his own.

A newlywed couple had moved far away in order to finish college. Predictably, they had no money to travel home for Christmas, and planned to spend it alone, just by themselves. But their pastor got wind of their simple plans, and invited them to his home for Christmas. Accepting this invitation, the couple arrived at the appointed time with a gift in hand and a casserole to share. The pastor welcomed them and then called upstairs to his teenaged sons: "Put your pants on; we've got company." Surprised, the couple saw that packages were still unopened under the tree. Although outsiders, they were nevertheless meant to share the intimate family circle as they opened their gifts under the tree. They had arrived expecting a meal, but left overwhelmed by this family's willingness to welcome them into their hearts. When Jesus came to dwell with us, he also invited us to be family. Not left out in the dark, but invited into that intimate circle of light.

But, like in any family, there are expectations -- dishes to be washed, rooms to be cleaned. And as part of the family of God, we have a job to do: to widen that circle. John says, we are to testify to the light. See, when God made us family, he also made us part of his redemptive plan. Our life on earth may be brief, but it is purposeful. We are to witness to that light. You simply tell what you know to be true. Maybe it isn't much. Maybe it isn't perfectly worded. But -- just like the children in that video clip you saw -- God uses you and me to share the story, each in his own way, so that everyone will have a chance to hear. In comparison with the universe, human history is brief. But throughout this time God persistently keeps the light glowing and vibrant, so that all may see it and have the opportunity to receive it. To chase away the darkness. You and I have an active part in the story!

It's the story behind the story. God the Son was not merely born of a virgin. God did not simply become human. God did more than just send his son into the world. On Christmas, we celebrate the bigger story: the redemption of humanity. As God takes upon himself our broken and imperfect nature, he transforms us into the restored image of himself. All that is tarnished and stained is polished and made pure. All that we lack is completed. All that is fractured is made whole. And why? Because God himself became one of us, so that we might be invited into the very center of God's love.

My friends, I don't know what brought you here today. Maybe you are searching for meaning in your life. Maybe you are carrying an unbearable burden. Maybe you just want to hear the story again, taking the opportunity to thank God for his gift of himself this Christmas. But whatever it is, here's the truth: Believing in Jesus, you are God's child. You are his son. You are his daughter. No matter what burden or brokenness you carry, God is willing to make you whole. Whatever part of you makes you feel unworthy -- whatever it is that keeps you in the darkness -- God wants to heal. To bring you light, which itself banishes darkness. God has taken upon himself the very brokenness of your life so that he might restore you into the beautiful child he made you to be. And he sends you out to share with the next person -- because everyone on this earth has his own story of brokenness. Everyone needs a way back to God, and Jesus is the open door.

How will you do that, starting today? What small difference can you make today, because God has entered our world and made you his own? Hear him calling out to you. Hear the good news of Christmas Day as God's invites you into his very heart, and answer the call. He's calling out to you today. Amen.