

## ***“Words You Should Know: Incarnation”***

*Philippians 2:1-11 • John 1:1-18*

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When a couple wants me to perform their wedding, one of the things this church requires is that they go through premarital counseling, usually with me. We talk about things like how to get along with the inlaws, how to talk about money with each other, and how to fight fair (we call that communication). But the first thing I always talk about with them is their faith. I like to organize that time around three questions that I learned from a pastor friend of mine: Does God exist? If so, is it possible to know God? And does it make a difference in your life?

So the first thing I usually do is ask them to tell me about God. I want to know what they think of when they think of God. What is God like? Many times I get an answer like, “Well I guess God is just everywhere and in everything – in the trees and the sunset and at the beach. A pastor at another church here in town told me that he was trying to encourage one of the members to come to worship more often. The man replied, “I’m more likely to find God while sitting in the front of my fishing boat than I am to catch a redfish while sitting in the front of the church.” Of course the truth is that he probably wasn’t more likely to find God while out fishing because he wasn’t looking for God. The point is that many people have a very abstract, impersonal view of God.

Some of them may have learned that view in church. For example, in the Westminster Larger Catechism, which we used to require people memorize in order to join the church, one of the questions is “What is God?” The answer: “God is a Spirit, in and of Himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in

goodness and truth.” Of course that’s all true about God, but it’s incomplete.

This is why we have been studying these “Words You Should Know,” so that we all have a better understanding of who God is. Today, our theological word is *incarnation*. A few weeks ago when we talked about revelation we learned that the only way any of us can know (and therefore say) anything about God is because He reveals Himself to us. I don’t mean some kind of private revelation to you. That’s the kind of thing that leads to spiritual abuse. No, God’s revelation is very public. He has revealed himself to us first of all in Scripture. But He reveals Himself most fully by coming here in person. The New Testament book of Hebrews begins, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” The ultimate revelation of God to us is the incarnation.

The word *incarnation* comes from Latin and literally means “in flesh,” or “in a body.” The Incarnation describes how the God who created all things entered into His creation as a human – not in some abstract sense but as a real, historical man. One of the clearest passages about the Incarnation is Philippians 2 which says, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” The Incarnation, therefore, is central to the Gospel and it’s the foundation of the Christian faith. Without the Incarnation there is no salvation.

Our reading from John 1 has probably the clearest description of the Incarnation and why it matters. The Gospels of Matthew and

Luke give us historical accounts of the birth of Jesus. While they certainly make it clear that the baby born in Bethlehem who was named Jesus is divine, John gives us a more philosophical and theological account. He begins by pointing us back to creation at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1. Like Genesis, John 1 begins, "In the beginning..." The word everyone expects next is *God*. Genesis begins, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John says the same thing but He says that Jesus is God. He borrows a term from Greek philosophy – Word, *Logos* in Greek, to describe the second person of the Trinity before His incarnation. God the Son, John says, is coequal and coeternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

The Son was equally involved in creation with the Father and the Spirit. This passage connects Jesus to several points in the Genesis creation account. For example, in Genesis, God creates by speaking. John shows us that Christ is the Word that created. The first thing God creates in Genesis is light. John says that Jesus is the Light. Then in verse 14, this Word, this *Logos* of God, "became flesh and dwelt among us." Incarnation. Actually, it literally says that He "tabernacled" with us, pointing us to the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, which was the place where God was present with His people while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

One of the reasons the Incarnation is so important for us is that we learn what God is like. When I talk to couples about faith in premarital counseling, one of the most important things I want them to get out of it is a more personal understanding of God. I want them to really know what God is like. I want the same for you. John 1:18 tells us, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." In the Incarnation we see what God is like. He's like Jesus. When you read the things Jesus did and

said, He's doing what God would do and say. That's God acting and speaking.

So what, exactly, does the Incarnation teach us? First of all, we see that Jesus is fully human. The Gospels tell us that he had a normal human body. He was born, he grew, he learned, he ate and drank, he got tired, and he experienced emotions like joy and anger and love. Jesus also experienced all the same temptations you and I do, except that he didn't sin. After his resurrection, when he appeared to his disciples, they thought he was a ghost. But he was still fully human, although he had his glorified body, just like you and I will get when this life is over. Jesus told Thomas to touch his hands and his side. He ate with his disciples several times and he walked with two of them on the road to Emmaus.

But the Incarnation also teaches us that Jesus is fully divine – He's God in person. He wasn't part human and part God. He wasn't a human that became divine, and he wasn't a divine spirit that appeared human. Colossians 2 says that the fullness of God dwelled in him bodily. We see his divinity in the miracles he performed – healing leprosy, restoring sight to the blind, making the lame to walk. We see His divinity when he walks on water and when he feeds thousands with nothing more than a sack lunch. He turned water into wine and He knew peoples' thoughts. He forgave sins. And most importantly he rose from the grave. No one else in the history of the world has ever done that.

The thing is, though, that in the Incarnation, God the Son willingly limited his divine attributes in order to enter into the human experience. As Philippians 2 put it, He emptied himself. For example, God is omnipresent, able to be everywhere at once. But the Son set that aside in the Incarnation in order to be present in one place. Likewise God is omnipotent (all powerful), and omniscient (all knowing) but Christ didn't "grasp" them and instead emptied himself of those things while on earth. I think that's why He spent so

much time in prayer. The Father and the Spirit were still omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. In His body Jesus depended on His relationship with the Father through the Spirit.

So what difference does the Incarnation make to us today? I think there are three significant ways it matters to us. First of all, that same relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit is now available to each of us! Acts 1 describes the Ascension of Jesus to Heaven. It says, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

The point is that Jesus didn’t leave His humanity behind when He returned to Heaven. He took it with Him. His bodily ascension was the final act of salvation so that *our* humanity also can enter heaven. This changes our prayers and our worship. Romans 8 begins, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” When we worship we no longer are trying to satisfy the wrath of God. We worship

instead out of a deep sense of gratitude. The Incarnation shows us how much God loves us and the length He was willing to go to rescue us. The incarnation also affects our prayer life. Romans 8 also says, “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Second, the Incarnation is the key that unlocks the rest of Scripture. As one theologian put it, “Until we grasp that Christ is God-in-flesh, the Old Testament will remain a collection of stories about how men and women struggled with the call to faith. The Incarnation helps us see that the Old Testament sets the stage for God to once again live with man as He did in Eden.” We also learn that the New Testament is not just a set of ethical instructions. It’s the true story of God’s rescue mission.

Finally, the Incarnation changes our ministry. In order to reach us God came here in person. He calls each of us to become like Jesus. You and I are called to be *incarnational* as well. We are to be the hands and feet of Jesus. That means we have to show up in peoples’ lives. We minister by being present, not simply sending money or sending someone else.

What’s God like? He’s like Jesus. We should be, too, and it should make all the difference in the world in our lives and in our church and in our community. May it be so.

*Amen.*