***Christmas Eve Service December 24, 2013***

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Isaiah 52:7-10, John 1:1-14

“In the flesh”

 Of all the Gospels that I’ve preached on since I’ve been here, and this is our third Christmas together, guess which one I haven’t preached on yet. That’s right, the Gospel of John. The reason why is because I have preferred to stick with the traditional Christmas stories of Luke or Matthew, and eschew the more ethereal, and even cerebral John that seems to speak of light and darkness, and in the beginning, and creation and things that seem a bit far more removed and much more heavenly than the shepherds or the donkeys or the manger. John doesn’t have all of that, in fact, he has none of that. But what John does have is what Isaiah refers to as the good news, or the Gospel of celebration and joy. John gives us the answer to the most important question of Christmas.

 Why did Jesus come among us? The other Gospels answer the how and paint a beautiful bucolic scene that we act out every year on Christmas Eve. These Gospels answer how Jesus came, what did it look like. Who was involved? Our legends have grown to fill in the blanks which include the donkey, the three kings, and other Christmas pageant favorites, like the camel. Who doesn’t like the camel? But the details of the Christmas story are not going to be the source of our study today, it is going to be the question: if there were no fall, if we were not sinners, would Jesus still have come?

 Is the coming of God in Christ as fully human and fully God, what we call the incarnation – or those who took confirmation with me know that it means literally: in the flesh. This event that we celebrate at Christmas, was this just the beginning of some rescue package that bails out humanity out of suffering and sin and death and evil, God’s down payment on a deal that’s finally clinched on Good Friday and Easter Day?

 This question, not how, but why, is a question that takes us to the heart of God. Now, the classic answer to this question is that Jesus came to save a people in distress. Another way to say it is he became what we are, so that we might become what he is. He became what we are in our human limitations, in being subject to our pain and suffering and death. We needed him to become like us so that we could be saved.

 Like a firefighter or a first responder climbing the stairs of our house that is on fire, he came to where we are and, with a great bear hug embraced us and brought us to safety at great cost to his own life and brought us home. This classic answer shows us that in Jesus, we’ve seen what both God and humanity truly look like. Jesus reveals what it means to be human and what it means to be God. In Jesus, the wall between humanity and God is replaced by a window. God sees us, and we see God, like never before.

 The mystery of Christmas is this: Jesus shows us that at the heart of what it means to be human is to be wrapped up in God, and at the heart of what it means to be God is to be wrapped up in the flesh, to be wrapped up in humanity. That is our Christmas present.

 Now, the only shortcoming to this rescuer idea, is that it leaves one important question unanswered. Did God come in the flesh to be with us in the sense of Isaiah’s joy and celebration. Were the feet rushing to come to earth blessed and rejoicing to be with us, or did God come out of a sense of frustration and disappointment? To me this is important. Why did Jesus come to earth? If we weren’t sinners, if he didn’t have to rescue us or just chose to be with us, would he have still come?

 John tells us today, yes, yes, yes. John tells us that God shaped purposefully who he is, his whole life, to be in relationships with us, so that we could be called his children. God determined, John tells us, that from the foundation of the universe never to be, except to be in relationship with us. God in the flesh, this incarnation comes out of the abundance of God, not out of the weakness of humanity. This may seem like a subtle insignificant point, but it is Christmas to me.

 Jesus isn’t some kind of hand grenade God lobbed into the earth’s atmosphere to

make an explosion of love, joy peace, forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus isn’t a device. Jesus isn’t just a solution to a problem. Jesus isn’t simply a piece of divine technology that backs up our hard drive when we crash. Jesus is the embodiment of there being nothing in God that is not committed to be in relationship to us, whatever the cost, and there being nothing in us that isn’t made for relationship with God. Jesus is what we were really made for and what God is really all about.

 Starting about the beginning of December, people stop talking about the economy and the basketball, and the football for a moment, and feel bold enough to ask each other a really personal question. “Anyone coming over for Christmas?” Of course they don’t think of it as a personal question. It sounds like just a request for information, as in fact all personal questions do. But the reason it’s personal is that Christmas involves a lot of sitting around doing not much, a bit of cooking, a bit of walking, a bit of playing games, a bit of just being together. Things we don’t do much of the rest of the year.

 You can’t hide behind email and getting ready for work next day because there isn’t any email and there isn’t any work next day. So you’d better make sure the people you’re spending Christmas with are people you can just hang around with. In fact saying “I want to spend Christmas with you” is saying to someone “I don’t see you as work or as some kind of means to an end: I see you as someone I just want to be with for your own sake. I want to be with you even if we’re hanging around doing not much.”

 It’s probably the least intense way of saying I love you. Chances are the people sitting either side of you tonight are people you deeply love, even if you maybe don’t put it into words very often. Not necessarily admire, not necessarily are attracted to, not necessarily find easy, not necessarily agree with on their choice of spouse or on your parenting technique, but nonetheless people you just want to be with and enjoy for their humanity and for the glimpse of divinity you see in them.

 It’s the simplicity and humanity of these relationships, not our great achievements, that characterize our true identity. Because this is the way God loves us. We are not God’s achievement. We are not a project God is constantly tinkering with in the garage till he gets us right. We are simply the ones with whom God wants to share his life. God doesn’t have a working relationship with us. God and humanity are not on a professional footing. God wants to spend Christmas with us – because he’s shaped his whole life simply to be with us. Of course God wants us to turn to him in faith and reverence, to order our lives as ones of righteousness and truth that issue in deeds of transparent kindness and costly generosity. But even if we don’t, God loves us anyway. That’s what Christmas shows us once and for all. And the way to celebrate Christmas is to love God back – not for what he gives us, for life and eternal life, for forgiveness and healing and hope and salvation, not out of gratitude or fear or admiration or wonder, but simply for his own sake, the same way he loves us.

 What there’s never been before is what’s revealed in Jesus: the news that God has shaped his whole life to be in relationship with us, and that he’s chosen to draw us into that relationship not by force, not by guilt, not by threat, not by necessity, but by beauty, by joy, by the winsome simplicity and vulnerability and magnetism of a tiny child. That’s why Christmas is the focal point of every year: because in this manger, in this baby, in this divine yet human flesh, we see God’s determination to be with us forever, come what may. That’s the heart of it all.