

When Heaven and Earth Meet

*This sermon was preached on December 6, 2009 by the Rev. Stephen W. DeGweck
and is based on Luke 3:1-6*

There's a true story which comes out of the old West about a group of Apaches who attacked a Calvary unit and captured the paymaster's safe. They'd never seen a safe before, but they knew it contained something valuable. Trouble is, they had no idea how to open it! They beat it with tomahawks. They dragged it over the ground with their horses. They heated it on a fire. They tried blasting it open with gun powder. Nothing worked. Finally, they dropped it off a cliff into a great ravine. Still the safe remained shut. At last, the Apaches gave up and abandoned the safe. Later on, the safe was recovered by the Army. When at last the paymaster rushed to it and turned the combination, the safe opened. For all practical purposes, the safe was a useless mystery, without the combination.

I often think; isn't that a bit like life? A mystery--unless we know the combination! Life may seem meaningless and pointless, an exercise in futility, until I find that I am a child of the King, a beloved child in the universe of my Father, who has a purpose for my life, and loves me above all.

Origen, one of the great Fathers of the Early Church, tried to explain the meaning of Advent and Christmas like this: suppose there existed a statue so large that the human eye couldn't take it all in at one glance. How best to help folks grasp the essence of this great statue? Perhaps it would do to make a scale model of the statue, much reduced in size, so that people might take it all in? That's what God has done in Christ, says Origen. He reveals himself to us within the bounds of our capacity to grasp and understand. In Jesus we see the full glory of the Father, the God who has come to us. And that's my first point. **GOD HAS COME DOWN.**

Allen Lingren, a professor at Garrett Theological Seminary in Chicago, tells of taking his 12 year-old son fishing one day. And as the fish weren't biting much, father and son had a chance to talk. Suddenly, Lingren's son asked him, "Dad, what's the toughest thing God ever tried to do?" Caught off guard, Lingren answered the question with a question. He replied, "What do you think is the toughest thing God ever tried to do? The boy said, "Well, when I started taking science in school, I thought that creating the world would be the toughest. Then when we studied Jesus' miracles in Sunday School, I thought that things like the Resurrection and all that might be the toughest. But the more I think about it, I realize that most people don't understand much about God, and so I think the toughest thing God ever tried to do is to get us to understand who he is, and that he loves us." And Lingren replied, "That's right, son. That's the toughest thing God ever had to do, and there was only one way he could do it." Our understanding of this season begins with this sobering thought: **GOD**

HUMBLLED HIMSELF ON OUR BEHALF.

Save me from those who dismiss Christmas as mere sentiment, or simply a time to gather with friends, or as just a time "for the children." My friends, Christian faith says that the God of all there is, the maker of time and space, took on human flesh and walked among us. If that is not true, then nothing else we say or do here is true, or matters at all. God has humbled himself.

Most of you know the name of John Croyle. John was an All-American football player at Alabama who walked away from a chance to play pro football, and instead started a home for troubled children called the "Big Oak Ranch." John spoke here at St. Luke's just a couple of years ago. Over the years, John and his wife have taken in hundreds of homeless, unwanted children and cared for them. Assisted by many big-name football players and coaches, John runs a program where the children receive large doses of tough love, evangelical Christianity, and hard work. It's grown into one of the largest and most well-known charitable organizations in the southeast. And it works. One reason why was made clear to me when I heard John say something when he visited St. Luke's. John and his family live in a small house on the ranch. John says "the kids know I love them, because I live in a smaller house than they do."

Too often, the servants of God in our world seek to live like royalty. "The boys say they know I love them," says John Croyle, "because I live in a smaller house than they do." The humility of a God who comes to share our very common human life communicates love to us in ways mere words never could. Do you ever stop and think how unlikely the whole Christmas nativity thing sounds? But was it not necessary? We humans would have the Son of God born in splendor, with trumpets and legions of angels, in grand style and pomp. Instead, the God we serve snuck in the back door, as it were, arriving in a barn, with animals for an audience, born to two nobodies, obscure peasants the world would never have known, but for this--God's plan to save us. God has humbled himself and come down to us. That's the first great truth about Christmas. Here's the second: **HUMANKIND HAS BEEN LIFTED UP.**

When I find that I am loved and valued, such that the Son of God was given to die for me, it bestows on me a dignity that is utterly transforming, and utterly a gift. God makes no distinction. God comes down to us because everyone of us is precious to him. And that love ennobles us. Some years ago, the St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. But references are tough things to evaluate, and reputations can hide huge personal flaws or oppressive egos. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea. Let's send a person, they said, to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the custodian at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man seeking to be our

president. This was done and one custodian gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected the new president of St. Paul's School of Theology. That's a true story. A humble working man felt a tremendous dignity and worth in the presence of his employer, someone who didn't have to give him the time of day, but who instead treated him with love and respect. It is the great gift of God that we should know that all of this, this Advent, this Christmas, this Good Friday, this Easter, is for us. The God of the universe has come for us! We are sons and daughters of the King!

God has come down. Humankind has been lifted up. At the intersection of God's love and our emptiness, of God's grace and our need, is the wonder of wonders: SALVATION HAS DRAWN NEAR. That was John's message, the one we read about today. Quoting Isaiah the prophet, the scripture says, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth. All flesh shall see the salvation of God." A famous artist once painted a picture of the nativity. In his painting, across the manger falls the shadow of a cross -- the cross of Calvary. Salvation is God's eternal plan for humanity. In the midst of the sentimentality of Christmas, we often forget: God's son was born among us for one purpose. The purpose was to die for your sins and mine, to give his life as a ransom for many. That is why he has come. That is why we have been lifted up. Heaven and earth intersect at the cross of Calvary.

You and I are recipients of a great, great gift. If there is any justification for the gift-giving of Christmas, it is to remind Christians that we are the recipients of the greatest gift of all. The God of creation has become the Babe of Bethlehem. The Babe of Bethlehem has become the Lamb of Calvary. Because of this divine drama which unfolds before our eyes, our salvation is made possible. His gift of salvation is offered freely to any who will accept it.

Strange, isn't it then, that so many of us just cannot believe it? Something in us says that it can't be that simple, there must be something we have to do to make it all right, something we have to fix up, or clean up, or shape up, before we dare respond to the good news, dare open our hands and accept the invitation. But God says no, not so. "Behold I stand at the door and knock," says the scripture. "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him." There is no gift we can give to the Christ who has come to die for us. Everything I have is his, anyway.

We're like the young fellow who couldn't get home from college at Christmas time. So he bought his father an inexpensive set of cufflinks, and an inexpensive tie tack, and enclosed a note which read, "Dear Dad, this is not much, but it's all you could afford." We have nothing to offer our God, nothing he wants, and nothing he needs. We can do only one thing in the face of such grace. We can

accept the gift, embrace it, and bask in its light and warmth. The gift of his love is unconditional and free. The Lord of Life accepts us as we are. Nothing you can do will make God love you any more or less than he does now. This is the grace of Christmas. This is the wonder of the gospel message.

God has come down. Humans have been lifted up. Salvation has come near. All we have to do is receive it joyfully. Like children who laugh with delight at the sheer grace of a Christmas morning's gifts, so such a gift comes to us. When we have nothing to offer but needy, broken lives, and open hands, God reaches to us. When we open our hearts to receive him, there again is the miracle of the manger, God born among us and within us again. Emmanuel, God-with-us. It is the chance once again for us that life can be made new, can begin again, can find exciting new meaning--at the intersection of heaven and earth, at the cross of our Christ, where a gracious God meets us and welcomes us home.