

SERIES: Advent

SERMON: **The Visit**

SCRIPTURE: John 1:10-18

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Our earth is of tremendous size to us. Few of us have circled it even once. Yet if our sun were hollow it could hold over one million of our earths, and there are stars in our galaxy that, if hollow, could hold over 100,000,000 of our suns! And there are at least 100,000,000 other galaxies, each with at least 100 billion stars! The sheer magnitude of this universe is mind boggling. Yet the Bible says that the God who created all of it, paid a special visit to one tiny planet in one little solar system in one average-size galaxy in one minute corner of this universe.

That visit was different from all other visits God may have made to other parts of His creation and even different from the other visits that we know He made to Planet Earth. I think, for example, of His visit when He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden, or when He met Moses on Mt. Sinai and wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets with His own finger. Those were amazing visits, but The Visit which concerns us this morning was far greater in significance. It occurred when a child was miraculously conceived in the womb of a young virgin named Mary, and God became a man. Christmas cannot even be understood without a solid grasp of this particular visit, so it would be prudent for us to examine it carefully.

### **God visited Planet Earth when “the Word” became a human being.**

My primary text for today is John 1:10-18, but I want us to read everything up to that point for context. Will you give attention as we read starting in John 1:1:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*

*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

*There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*

*(Now here is our primary text). He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

*John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given*

*through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

In the opening words of John's Gospel we learn about Someone called "the Word"—almost universally recognized as referring to Jesus Christ. Many have wondered why the Apostle John refers to Him as "the Word," rather than using His name, but the reason is rather simple. Just as a spoken or written word is an outward manifestation of an invisible thought, so Jesus, the Living Word, is the outward manifestation of the invisible God.

The text goes on to point out that this Word existed from all eternity. He was God. He created all things. He was the source of all life and light. However, the Word chose not to remain in the glory and splendor of heaven, but decided rather to set that all aside and become a man. The time was at the height of the Roman Empire. The place was the Holy Land. The means was a Virgin Birth. As verse 14 says, "The Word became flesh."

**1. He "became flesh." (14)** The name theologians have given to this amazing event is "the incarnation." The term comes from the Latin word *carne*, which means flesh, as in carnivorous. The eternal Word of God took on human flesh, becoming a human being in the fullest sense of the word. He had not only a human personality and human characteristics but also a human body. In fact, He was every bit as human as any one of us, yet without sin, a fact we saw clearly taught in Hebrews 4:15 just last Sunday.

The very idea that God could become a man here on earth is, on one level, utterly astounding and, on another level, almost to be expected. It is astounding when we compare the size of our planet with the universe at large. And it is even more astounding when we compare the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the human race with the absolute purity and holiness of God. In fact, the incarnation is so astounding that most people, even many religious ones, reject the notion as utterly fanciful.

Yet on another level the incarnation is eminently sensible and even logically necessary, especially if one accepts the rudimentary storyline of Scripture. If indeed God created a species of creatures uniquely suited for fellowship with Himself, and if that species rebelled against its Creator and lost fellowship with Him because of sin, and if the Creator loved that species enough to try to bring them back into relationship with Himself, how else could He accomplish that without becoming one of them? He could try to send messages; He could try to use intermediaries; He could try getting their attention through benevolent miracles or tragic judgments (and, of course, He did all those things). But given the fact that the creatures were limited by space and time (to say nothing of sinful), while God is eternal and infinite and holy, how could the gap be bridged sufficiently for those creatures to understand God's love unless He entered their universe?

There is a fascinating little book I read when I was studying philosophy in graduate school, called *Flatland*, written by Edwin A. Abbott, a schoolmaster who died in 1926. It is the story of a square living in a universe known as Flatland, who sets about trying to understand those who

live in universes with more or fewer dimensions than his own. Four different worlds are portrayed in this book: Pointland, Lineland, Flatland, and Spaceland. It helps to have a basic understanding of geometry to grasp Abbott's plot, like the fact that a point has no dimensions; a line has one—length; a square or triangle has two—length and width; and a cube or sphere has three—length, width, and depth.

Abbot imagines that there are living, thinking creatures in each of these worlds and reasons how difficult it would be for a being in one such world to communicate with a being in a world of different dimensions. The most interesting of the subplots is when the two-dimensional Square leaves Flatland to visit Spaceland and then returns and tries his best to convey to his compatriots in Flatland what the world of three dimensions is like. Well, not surprisingly, his fellow Squares and Triangles and Parallelograms put him in jail for seditious teaching.

Eventually a Sphere from Spaceland invades Flatland, but even then the two-dimensional creatures refuse to believe what the Square has told them because they cannot comprehend the Sphere. They see his circularity but they cannot grasp his depth. They know he is different from anything they have met before, but they are incapable of understanding the essence of that difference.

Now I don't know whether Abbott intended his book to be a theological allegory, but to me it is a profound parable of what God was dealing with when He, the infinite Lord of the universe, wished to communicate with our *merely* three dimensional world. He allowed His prophets to catch a glimpse of the glory of eternity, but when they shared their knowledge, they were rejected, and sometimes even imprisoned or murdered. So God took the unprecedented step of personally invading our three dimensional world by sending His Son to become one of us.

Friends, the Bible makes it clear that the Incarnation is not an optional truth; it is not something over which good Christians can legitimately differ, as they can over the appropriate mode of baptism or the extent of man's free will or the time of the Rapture. The same Apostle John whose words we are studying in the Gospel of John, wrote in another book, called the First Epistle of John,

*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (1 John 4:1-3).*

Let me tell you very plainly how important the incarnation is. The coming of God to Planet Earth in human flesh in the person of Jesus is such a basic and fundamental truth of Christianity that those who reject it are not even Christians, according to the Apostle John. They are anti-Christians, followers of the Antichrist.

Now John tells us more about the Visit in John 1:14:

**2. He “made his dwelling among us.” (14)** The Greek term translated “made his dwelling” literally means “to pitch one’s tent.” It signifies a temporary sojourn rather than a putting down of one’s roots. That fits the facts well, for while Christ’s Incarnation was permanent, His dwelling among us was temporary. When the Word became flesh through the Virgin Birth, the result was a person, Jesus Christ, who was both God and man. He is still both God and man. He will always be both God and man, though, of course, He now has a resurrection body. But His “dwelling among us” ceased at the time of His ascension.

When my grandson, Michael, was about three years old he was given a cardboard castle for Christmas—a Disney World product. He liked to get in and talk to me through the window, but what he liked most was for me to get down and squeeze through the door and play with him inside the castle. When I did that, I entered his world, I came down to his level, and his eyes lighted up. But I didn’t enter his world to stay there with him. I entered his world to connect with him and ultimately help bring him into mine. The castle has long since been discarded for football and an iPod. Eventually those will be replaced by academics and girls and a car and a job.

Jesus did not become flesh to *stay* in a manger. Some people love Christmas but never seem to get past it. They admire the baby and fantasize about the magi and the shepherds and the angels. But they never seem to grasp that all that was only the entry point.

It is also true that Jesus did not become flesh to remain as a teacher and healer in this world. Some people love the stories of Jesus in the Gospels but never seem to get past the parables and the miracles. They admire the man and revel in His unique impact. But they never seem to grasp that all that was temporary and preparatory for His primary purpose.

**3. He revealed what God is like. (14-18)** Look at verse 18: “No one has ever seen God, but God the one and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” The invisibility of God is a consistent and clear teaching of Scripture:

Ex. 33:20: “No one may see me and live.”

Deut. 4:12: “Moses saw no form—He only heard a voice.”

I Tim. 6:16: “No man has seen God or can see Him.”

The reason no one has seen Him is that He is invisible; He is spirit and has no body. The references we find occasionally in the OT to God’s eyes roving to and fro around the earth, or God’s hand of judgment landing on someone, or God’s strong right arm delivering His people are all metaphors called anthropomorphisms by theologians, a term which means a description of God in human terms so humans can understand Him better.

But all the anthropomorphisms in the world could not reveal God sufficiently to finite human beings who have no basis for understanding the infinite. Believers in the OT knew God, but except for a few notable exceptions—like Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and David—they knew Him only indirectly, often vaguely, and always incompletely. Consider the well-known fact that in the OT Israel was constantly going into idolatry. Why was that? Because they desired a God

who was more knowable and tangible, as were the gods of the heathen. The reason Aaron built the golden calf was not so the people could worship a pagan idol; it was so that they could visualize the true God. It was still sinful because God had clearly forbidden such visualization (due to the fact that idols always misrepresent Him), but his motive was not entirely evil.

From time to time God condescended to make Himself a little more visible and tangible to His people. For example, He appeared in a burning bush, in the form of an angel. He showed the effects of His presence through miracles and mighty acts of providence and judgment. But still God's people failed to grasp how great a God He was or how much He loved them. So eventually God sent His own Son to reveal Himself perfectly. And Jesus, the Son of God, "*has made him known,*" according to verse 18.

Have you ever heard the term "exegesis" or "exegete?" Seminary profs like to use it because it is the most precise word for the science of Bible interpretation. To exegete the Scriptures means to study the original in great detail in order to draw out of them their full meaning—all the hidden implications and subtle nuances. Well, the Greek term for "exegesis" is the very word used here in verse 18 to describe what Jesus has done for us through the Incarnation. He has exegeted the Father, made Him known, explained Him in full.

Do you remember where Jesus said to His disciples in John 14:6ff, . . .

*"I am the Way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through Me? If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen Him."*

*Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?"*

In Jesus Christ our three-dimensional universe was invaded and the invisible God became visible.

Three particular characteristics or attributes of God which Jesus revealed are mentioned in verses 14-18: glory, grace, and truth. Look again at verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

**1. Glory.** The best definition of glory I know is "the splendor of deity." Jesus was God veiled in flesh, but the veil could not hide completely who He was. He didn't have to go around saying, "I am God, I am God, I am God," for people who took the time to examine Him could see His glory shining through. It shone in His words, in His actions, in His reactions, in His miracles. Once in a while it broke through in an astounding way, as on the Mount of Transfiguration.

**2. Grace.** Grace always has the idea of something undeserved, something one could not earn or achieve for oneself. When it says that Jesus was full of grace, it means He was the very embodiment of God's undeserved love to us. Grace also has the idea of beauty in it. In modern

Greek the word used here means “charm.” In Jesus we see the sheer winsomeness of God.

Verse 16 tells us how available this grace is to us, for “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.” The “we” here is clearly speaking of believers, for though there is a common grace that extends to every human being, the fullness of grace is available only to those who are God’s spiritual children. His grace overflows into our lives. The better we get to know Him, the more wonderful He becomes. The longer we serve Him, the sweeter He grows. As one act of divine grace recedes it is replaced by another. God’s grace to His people is continuous and is never exhausted. It knows no interruptions and no limits.

**3. Truth.** Whereas grace is a subjective characteristic, truth is an objective one. Truth means “that which corresponds to reality.” Jesus always spoke the truth, always acted truthfully, and even went so far as to claim, “I am the truth.” He also sent the Holy Spirit to guide His disciples into all truth.

John summarizes the significance of Jesus’ incarnation in verse 17 with a statement that must have had a tremendous impact on his Jewish audience: “The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” As great as was the prophet Moses, and as great as was the Mosaic Law, they were not God’s final revelation, nor His highest. That sounds a lot like what the book of Hebrews has been telling us, doesn’t it? Though the Law had a measure of grace and was truthful as far as it went, grace and truth came preeminently and fully only in Jesus Christ.

So much for the Visit itself. What I want us to consider now is how mankind responded to the Visit. In view of the way people generally respond to a presidential visit to a world class city, or even a visit by Taylor Swift to Wichita, one might think that no theater or coliseum would have been sufficient to hold the crowds when God Himself came to visit. But no, . . .

### **The Visit was met with rejection by most. (10, 11)**

Verse 10 reads, “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” Who was it that failed to recognize Jesus as God come in the flesh?

**1. The secular world did not recognize him. (10)** One need only read the life of Christ in any of the Gospels to notice the total disinterest of the Roman power brokers or the Greek intellectuals in this itinerant rabbi who walked the dusty paths of Galilee and Judea for three and a half years. Only a rare contemporary writer even noted His existence or His influence. More surprisingly and pathetically, . . .

**2. The religious world did not accept him. (11)** When John says “his own” did not receive Him, he’s probably thinking particularly of the Jewish people, for Jesus was Jewish and did most of His ministry among them. For centuries they had been looking for their Messiah—the One who would deliver them from their enemies and restore the great influence and power they once enjoyed under David and Solomon. They longed for self-rule, for economic freedom, for

moral direction.

But when their Messiah arrived, how did they respond? There was a near total failure on the part of the religious hierarchy of Judaism to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. The Gospels trace this rejection from the lack of room for the infant Jesus in the Inn at Bethlehem, to the skepticism generated when he appeared at the Temple at 12, to the constant antagonism exhibited toward Him in His ministry to the total rejection He suffered at the Cross as they chanted “crucify Him.”

But before we come down too hard on the Jewish people, allow me to ask, “What would we have done if we were there?” If we had been expecting a Messiah to deliver us, would we have expected Him to be born of an unmarried peasant woman in a backwater town like Bethlehem, to be reared in a filthy little town like Nazareth, and working as an uneducated carpenter? Would we have expected Him to surround Himself with fishermen and roughnecks, prostitutes and tax men? I think not.

Tragically, the Visit of God to this world in the person of Jesus Christ met rejection by both the secular world and the religious world. But praise God, . . .

### **The Visit was welcomed by a few. (12,13)**

Verse 12 reads, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” The number was not large and it never consisted of any significant number of movers and shakers, but some believed. It is the same today. But I want to ask two questions:

**1. What does it mean to “receive” Jesus Christ? (12)** That has to be a pretty important question. If those, and only those, who receive Jesus have the right to become children of God, it’s essential that we understand what it means to receive Him. There is a lot of jargon or shop-talk that Christians use to describe their religious experience, and some of it can be pretty confusing to the non-initiated. Among the varied expressions you are likely to hear are these:

I’ve been born again;  
 I prayed to receive Christ;  
 I committed my life to Jesus Christ;  
 I invited Jesus into my heart;  
 I went forward and surrendered;  
 I trusted Christ;  
 I was converted;  
 I entered into a personal relationship with God;  
 I came to know Christ as my Savior;  
 I’ve been saved;  
 I became a Christian,  
 and on and on we could go.

Most of these terms are used synonymously. Some are biblical and some are cultural; some are

vague and others are more descriptive. But in my estimation one of the best terms to describe what happens when one becomes a child of God is found right here in John 1:12: “I *received* Jesus Christ.” It is clearly a biblical term and it reveals a lot about the process of salvation.

First, to receive someone or something implies that someone else initiated the exchange. In other words, if you receive a gift it first has to be offered. And nothing is clearer in the Scripture than that the plan of salvation is initiated by God. If He didn't seek us out we would never seek Him.

Second, to receive is an action word. One doesn't receive Jesus merely by hearing the truth and intellectually assenting to it or just by refraining from actively opposing it. Rather one receives Jesus by welcoming Him into one's life as Lord, Savior, and Friend. An illustration I have often used with those considering the claims of Christ is to take out a twenty dollar bill, hold it out and say, “Here I'm giving this to you.” They usually look at me rather skeptically, and then I ask, “Is it yours?” Often they hesitate and say, “Well, I guess so if you're really giving it to me.” And then I have to come back and say, “But as long as I'm still holding it, it's not yours, is it? You can believe I'm willing to give it to you, but unless you reach out and receive it, it's not really yours.”

Third, to receive is a decisive term. The tense used in the original makes it clear that receiving Jesus is a point action with permanent implications. It might be analogous to the kind of decision a resident alien makes when he chooses to become a citizen of the United States. In taking the oath of citizenship he is making a permanent decision to renounce his former citizenship and to accept all that it means to be an American.

Fourth, John himself explains receiving Jesus as “believing in His name.” The Greek actually reads, “believing *into* His name,” implying much more than mere intellectual assent. Believing in Jesus' name means believing in His Person, His character, His nature—believing in all that His names tell us about Him, that He is Savior, God, King of kings, Lord of lords, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Living Water, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the End, etc.

A second very important question is this:

**2. What does it mean to be a “child of God?” (12,13)** “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.” There is, of course, a sense in which all human beings are children of God, for He created all of us. Some theologians have focused exclusively on this sense of childhood and have ignored the fact that there is a far more common use of the term in Scripture that applies only to those who have received Jesus.

John is clearly talking about the “spiritual children of God,” and he makes it clear that one does not become a child of God by being born into a believing family or a predominantly Christian ethnic group. It has nothing to do with human effort or normal reproductive processes. You can't

buy your way in. You can't earn your way. You must receive God's Son, believing into His name, in order to become a child of God.

**Conclusion:** Friends, is it not the worst of all possible crimes for a creature like you or me to ignore the One who visited our little dirty tennis ball of a planet in order to establish an eternal relationship with us, to allow us into His presence, to see His glory, to experience His grace?

During this week we will all be opening gifts—many of which we will not need and cannot use. But becoming a child of God is a gift which all of us need and without which we will spend eternity separated from the God who loved us so much that He sent His one and only Son to die for us. God forbid that we should fail to receive that gift, and to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that God visited us in the person of Jesus Christ.