

Christmas Eve B 2017
December 24, 2017 :: Luke 2: 1-20
Fr. Jim Cook

“The Incarnation and the Nativity.”

Every profession has its own unique jargon. We who are professionals in the Church are no different. But I won't bore you with a long list of terms that would probably mean absolutely nothing to most of us here. But I will tell you that, at this time of year, two terms occupy a prominent place in our theological conversations: and those two terms are Nativity and Incarnation.

Nativity simply means “birth.” But we're probably more familiar with some of the variations of this word. For example, we may talk about one's native land, when we're talking about where someone was born. Or we may talk about pre-natal health care, when we're talking about what a pregnant woman might do to ensure the birth of a healthy child. But in our present context, when we talk about the Nativity, we're talking specifically about the birth of Jesus.

Now, Incarnation refers to the “act of being made flesh.” I tried to think of some more familiar variations of this word, but the only thing I could come up with was *Carne Asada*, a Mexican

dish consisting of grilled or roasted meat. (I did recall the term Carnal Knowledge, but that hardly seemed appropriate for a Christmas sermon.) In any event, and in our present context, when we're talking about the Incarnation, we are talking about the action whereby God became an honest-to-goodness, flesh-and-blood human being.

And what the writers of the gospels are proclaiming, to anyone who will listen, is that, two thousand years ago, Nativity and Incarnation came together in a special way: that is, God took on human flesh, and was born into this world, in the body of a baby whose parents named him Jesus.

Now pay close attention, because this is important: the gospel writers simply *proclaim* the birth of Jesus. They never try to describe *how* it happened; they simple say that it *did* happen. And what Christians have been struggling with ever since is the *Why?* of it all. Why did God become a human being? And that, my friends, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

However, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard once wrote a parable to describe the Why? of the Nativity and Incarnation, and here it is:

Once upon a time there was a certain king who was very rich. His power and preeminence were known throughout the world. Yet something was missing in his life that kept him unhappy — he desired a wife. Without a queen, the palace was empty.

One day, while riding through the streets of a small village, he saw a beautiful peasant girl. So lovely was she that the heart of the king was immediately won. He desired her more than anything he had ever wanted. On succeeding days, he would ride by her house on the mere hope of seeing her for a moment in passing. And he wondered how he might win her love.

He thought to himself, “I will draw up a royal decree and require her to be brought before me — and then I shall make her the queen of my land!” But as he considered, the king realized that she was [his] subject and would be forced to obey. He could never be quite sure that he had won her love.

Then he said to himself, “I shall call on her in person. I shall dress in my royal garb, wear my jeweled crown, my best rings, my silver sword, and my most colorful tunic. I will overwhelm her with my majesty and position, and sweep her off her feet to become my bride.” But as he pondered the idea, he knew that he would always wonder whether she had married him for [love, or for] the riches and the power that he could give her.

Then he decided to dress as a peasant, drive to town, and have his carriage let him off. In disguise, he would approach her house. But,

somehow, the duplicity of this plan did not appeal to him.

At last, he knew what he would do. He would shed his royal robes. He would go to the village and *become* one of the peasants. He would work with them. He would live with them. He would suffer with them. He would actually become one of them. This he did, and in so doing he won his wife.

In other words – and to paraphrase 1st John 4:19 – she loved him because he first loved her.

You see, the Nativity and the Incarnation – in other words, Christmas – was God’s answer to the question “How can I get these people to fall in love with me?”

I’m sure God thought about trying to command us to be in a relationship with him – and maybe that’s a bit of what the Ten Commandments are all about. But being in a relationship with someone, and loving that person, can be two very different things.

And I'm sure God considered trying to amaze and astound us into a relationship with him. "Look at all that I've created, and all that I control, and all that I've done. How about *that*?" And that might actually attract a lot of people into relationship with him. But would it necessarily cause them to love God? I don't know. After all, I've watched a lot of magicians in my time, but I've never actually loved any of them.

And so, like the king in the parable, God realized that (a) the only way of entering into a relationship with us, and (b) to get us to love him, was for God to be one of us. And in the baby Jesus, God was born into the world of men and women. He wasn't just a God in human skin; he was actually one of us. He grew up among us, and had a family just like many of us. He learned to work with his hands, and he shared our labors. During the great festivals of the year, he celebrated with us. When a member of the community died, he grieved with us. And when a new member was born into our community, he celebrated with us. And for thirty-three years, God was one of us. And because of all this, we came to know him, and we came to love him. We loved him, in other words, because he first loved us.

And that, my friends, is the Christmas story. It's a *love* story. It's the story of how far someone will go, it's the story of how much one person will do, for someone else. And it's a story that tells us that what makes relationships truly special is not what we can *get* from them, but what we can *give* to them. And maybe that's why we exchange gifts at Christmas, because it all began with one big gift: God's gift of himself.

In the end, when we talk about Christmas, we can use all the big words we want – words like Nativity and Incarnation. But if we focus on all that jargon, we're likely going to miss the real point of it all: that God loved us so much, that it wasn't enough for him to remain in heaven with us on earth. He came to be with us, to love us, and earn our love for him.

And even though Jesus has returned to heaven, his Spirit remains with us, and there's no place where we can go that the Spirit isn't already there. And whenever we want to talk to him, he's all ears. And so, forever, because of Christmas, not only can we have a personal relationship with God, but everyday we can renew this grand, divine love affair between God and his people, who can, and once again, walk side by side.

Amen.