

## **“What Incarnation?!”**

*Advent 2017 – part 5*

Luke 2:1-20

My dad got a new hunting dog this summer. Her name is Miley. She is a beautiful, brown, German-shorthair-pointer, but there is one thing I have learned about her. She is easily startled. No matter how calm and gentle I try to be, she always seems to be scared of me. I have tried treats and long walks and even crawling up close to her, but whenever I enter the room, her first instinct is to run over to my wife, Katja, and hide behind her. It’s almost comical.

Miley reminds me, though, that there are a lot of things in this world that startle and surprise us. Loud sirens, for example. Don’t you just hate it when you are driving, and an ambulance or firetruck blasts out of nowhere, making you jump out of your skin? Or have you ever been near a lightning strike? Or in a ferocious wind storm? The bigger, louder, and more powerful the force, the more we want to find a place to hide until it passes.

There are a lot of times in the Christmas story where certain people are startled and told, “Do not be afraid.” The angel says it to Zachariah. To Mary. To Joseph in a dream. And of course, the angel says it to the shepherds freaking out in the field. “Don’t be afraid!” Ever notice that when someone says, “Don’t be afraid,” it doesn’t seem to help much? Probably because whatever is happening is exactly what the person is afraid of!

Luke tells us that the “glory of the Lord shone around” the shepherds. (Luke 2:10) This is a problem. The glory of the Lord is so bright, so holy, and so awesome, that it surprises them and leaves them feeling small and vulnerable.

The angel has to be very persuasive to keep the shepherds from panicking like the flocks they are supposed to protect.

We might think “the glory of the Lord” is just a cute spotlight shining on a couple of angels in a Christmas play. But when the Bible speaks of the glory of the Lord, it is a serious problem. The truth is, God is so glorious and so holy that we cannot approach God on our own. God in his power not only surprises us, God scares us.

You see, the Bible tells us of a divine dilemma God finds himself in. God is love. God desires a relationship with us. Yet God is perfect in every way. Perfectly holy. Perfectly glorious. And we humans are frail, sinful, and broken. In our current state, to stand in the presence of God’s glory would consume us.

What is the solution? God, in his holiness and perfection, cannot simply ignore our sin. And we have no way to rescue ourselves. We need a Savior, someone to step in and show us the way to salvation.

Paul Harvey once told a story of a farmer who heard a thumping noise at his window one cold, snowy night. He looked outside and saw a flock of small birds freezing to death. Desperate to try to help them, he ran outside and tried to gather up the birds to take them to safety of his warm barn. He turned on the lights and opened the barn door wide. He left bread crumbs in trails leading to the barn. But the birds ignored the food and flapped helplessly in the deepening snow. He tried to catch them. He tried shooping them in by waving his arms. Nothing worked.

“The farmer then realized that they were afraid of him. “To them,” he reasoned, “I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way

to let them know that they can trust me...That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how?...

“If only I could be a bird,” he thought to himself, “and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear and understand.”

([www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/christmas\\_classics\\_the\\_man\\_and\\_the\\_birds\\_by\\_paul\\_harvey](http://www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/christmas_classics_the_man_and_the_birds_by_paul_harvey))

There are times when the world seems very dark and cold. There are so many things we are weary of: anger, greed, hatred, regret, violence, depression, loneliness. God never intended for us to experience these things, yet we go back to them over and over again, like the sparrows in the cold.

The truth is, we want to be saved. We want to escape the hurt and sorrow. We want to see an end to sin, destruction, and death. We want our relationships to be healed. God sees all of that, and knows, if he can become like one of us, he can lead us to safety. On the first Christmas, God entered our world as a baby, so as not to “startle us.” God chose to step into our lives. We call it the Incarnation.

My message title has a double meaning. What Incarnation? In the first sense, it means that the Incarnation needs to be explained. God became flesh – incarnate – so that he could save the world. But there is a second meaning – What Incarnation?! Sort of like the old fashioned saying, “What in tarnation?!” It is an exclamation of surprise. As in, “Wow, God became human?! How does that make sense?” This gift of God is completely unexpected.

Hundreds of years ago, the great theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote about the surprising nature of God’s gift of the Incarnation. In one way, he said, the

Incarnation was not necessary for God to save us. There were other ways for God to save the world. After all, God can do anything. However, the Incarnation was the best way to save us. Or, as another great writer, Augustine, put it, "there was not a more fitting way of healing our misery."

We cannot save ourselves. We need the perfect substitute, the perfect sacrifice acceptable to the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was perfect, righteous, and holy. He was the only one who could save us. And he did so willingly, because he loves us.

There are a lot of things about Christmas that seem impossible to believe. The virgin birth. The star in the sky. But the most incredible, the most controversial, is that Jesus was both fully human and fully God. This has been a source of wonder for two thousand years. Even one of my favorite songs on the radio right now has this line: "How much heaven and how much earth were in this baby at his birth?" (Todd Agnew, "Did You Know") The answer is: all of them.

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Two natures in one person. They existed together, in the same place and same time, in one wonderful package. Not stuck together, like two Lego blocks. God and man existed in complete unity in Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is surprising. It is confusing. And it is wonderful.

So does Christmas still surprise you? Does the wonder of the Incarnation leave you trembling? Do you even have a glimmer of what it cost Jesus to live among us, to suffer for us, to die and be raised back to life? How great was his love that he would willingly depart the glory of heaven and enter into our world!

Christmas is full of the things we love. We love the carols. We love the candles. We love the presents. We love the cookies and eggnog! In this busy

time, it is so easy to forget the true reason for the season is the Incarnation.

Tonight we celebrate the gift of God that made salvation available to all.

I pray earnestly that Jesus Christ surprises you. I pray that you will know him the way the shepherds and wise men knew him. They beheld the wonder of it all. I pray you will know Jesus the way his disciples knew him, as Master, Savior, and Lord. This might not be your first Christmas, but it might be the first Christmas you truly open up your heart to the one who is the King of Kings, the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us. This evening, you are invited into a story of wonder and surprise. You are given an invitation to the banquet of God Incarnate.

Memory Verse: John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever worked with a child or a pet that was afraid of you? What did you do to reassure them?
2. What part of the Christmas story is most amazing to you?
3. Are you surprised that Jesus temporarily gave up heaven for us?
4. Would you give your heart to Jesus and let him save you?