

## Christmas Is Our Story | Philippians 2:6-11

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Preaching Draft | December 24, 2023 (Christmas Eve)

My favorite Christmas story growing up was *The Polar Express*. It's the story of a young boy who hears the whistle of a train late on Christmas Eve. Soon he's whisked off to the North Pole with other kids, where Santa will pick one to receive the first gift of Christmas. Picking up there:

[Santa] marched over to us and, pointing to me, said, "Let's have this fellow here." He jumped into his sleigh. The conductor handed me up. I sat on Santa's knee and he asked, "Now, what would you like for Christmas?"

I knew that I could have any gift I could imagine... But what I wanted more than anything was one silver bell from Santa's sleigh.... [Santa] told an elf to cut a bell from a reindeer's harness. He stood, holding the bell high above him, and called out, "The first gift of Christmas!"

Sadly, our young man loses the bell through a hole in his pajamas, and rides home heartbroken. But on Christmas morning, there's one last package for him, with a note:

"Found this on the seat of my sleigh. Fix that hole in your pocket." Signed, "Mr. C."

The bell's sound was magical to the boy and his sister. But their parents couldn't hear it. The book ends with a lone picture of the bell [Pic of bell] and these words:

At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even [my sister] found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe.

Returning to this story as an adult, I see in it a parable. Whether because of busyness, disappointments, or doubts, life can lose its sense of **enchantment**. Dreams, hopes or beliefs we once cherished, give way to grown-up pragmatism, or worse, cynicism. Life can lose its sense of hope and meaning—like a bell whose sound we can no longer hear [take pic down].

For a long time, it was the Christian story that gave the world music and meaning. Far from a cosmic accident, every blade of grass, every shining star, every face, was a gift from God, made to glorify God. Maybe you believed that story once. Maybe it's lost its ring. Maybe you've never heard it.

The Christmas story, which we celebrate tonight, takes us to the heart of this Christian story. Turning to Saint Paul's poetic telling of it in Philippians 2:6-11, I want us all to see if we can hear it's sweet sound afresh. In this hymn-like account of Christ's coming into the world, I hope you'll see three things: **(1) a place to find yourself. (2) The God who humbles himself. (3) A call that can heal the self.**

### I. A Place to Find Yourself

Imagine I hold before you the 882-page Penguin Classics edition of *David Copperfield*. And you've never read it. I tear out a single page from the middle of the book, point to a single paragraph on that page, and ask you to read it. You read,

as I wrote to Agnes on a fine evening by my open window, and the remembrance of her clear calm eyes and gentle face came stealing over me, it shed such a peaceful influence upon the hurry and agitation in which I had been living lately, and of which my very happiness partook in some degree, that it soothed me into tears.<sup>1</sup>

I then ask you if you understand it. You tell me you understand every single word, and can even parse the grammar perfectly. And indeed, you can. But none of this means you really grasp its meaning. You don't know it's Copperfield writing. And you certainly don't know that he's writing to this dear Agnes only moments after becoming engaged to another woman, Dora. Nor do you know the twists and turns that brought him her, nor what this letter forbodes.

It is entirely possible to understand and misunderstand something, at the same time. And the fault—when it comes to events or individuals—usually lies in the fact that we are not seeing things through a wide enough, or penetrating enough, lens.

And this is a mistake Paul does not make in his telling of Christ' birth in Philippians 2. He devotes only a single phrase to that starry night in Bethlehem, **"born in the likeness of men"** (2:7). But he situates that event in light of *all of history, all of humanity, all of reality*.

All history sits between the bookends of Christ pre-temporal existence **"in the form of God"** (v.7) and the poems conclusion with **"every knee bowing"** and **"every tongue confessing"** that Jesus Christ is Lord (vv9-10).

All humanity is captured in the words when Paul says that **"at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,"** (v10)—under the earth speaks to all who have died.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 496.

And between Paul's mention of God, the uncreated, eternal Being, and all life in heaven, earth and under the earth, is all of reality.

**Lesson:** We cannot understand ourselves until we see our lives in light of the Christ story:

Paul's framing of Jesus' birth is not only instructive for understanding Jesus. It's instructive for understanding ourselves—for as we've seen, Paul draws us into this story. And Paul is therefore saying that we cannot understand ourselves until we see that our lives are a page within this much larger, cosmic drama about God, Christ, and worship.

**Apply:** how well do you really know yourself?

- Could it be that interpreting our lives merely in light of modern science, or in light of our own feelings, tells us a few things, but leave us misguided about who we are, what we are for.
- It may be important to know you hail from Virginia, or America, or Africa, or Australia—but it's infinitely more important to know whether you come from God, or nothing
- And it may be helpful to discover your talents, and hone them toward a productive life—but it would be tragic to learn that your greatest talent lied in your capacity to know and worship God, and you've never used it.

Sum: The Christmas story is not a quaint story about one family and one boy that lived way back then. It is the story of *everything*, or *everyone*—and if we have eyes to see, this is the place where we can find ourselves.

[T] We don't only see ourselves, however. In the Christmas story we meet another—the God who humbles himself.

## II. The Self Who Emptied Himself

The doorway that leads into the church, which sits atop of what is the place where historians believe Jesus was born, is only four feet tall and two feet wide. You must bow down to walk through it. They call it, "**The Door of Humility.**"

It's fitting, especially when we consider the Odyssey of humiliation that Jesus undertakes in this passage. It is a descent in three steps.

**First**, Jesus determines not to leverage his divinity to his advantage, but instead offers himself to the Father's will, becoming a servant to our interests, not his own:

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant (6-7).

**Second**, Jesus conceals his glory “under the weakness of flesh,”<sup>2</sup> “being born in the likeness of men (7).

**Third**, appearing before humankind, Jesus humbles himself again, to the point of being rejected, incriminated, and killed by the very people he came to save. Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (8).

And notice he did all this willingly: he emptied *himself*.” “He humbled *himself*” (7, 8).

**Jesus’ Humility Different:** You see, Jesus’ humility is not like ours. We typically learn humility when it is forced upon us, when we realize there are others that are simply superior to us. Not so with Jesus. Jesus’ superiority over every human he encountered was qualitatively infinite. Therefore, Jesus always had to *choose* humility, lowering himself to appear a fool, or weak, or ignorable, before those who, if the conditions were different, would lay prostrate before his glory.

Why would he do this?

To be near us

In **Shakespeare’s play, *Henry V***, on the night before the battle of **Agincourt**, king Henry disguises himself beneath a hooded black cloak, and goes into the camp to be with his men. He sits with a few who do not recognize him, and talk ensues about the ensuing battle. The soldiers are outnumbered and afraid. Talk soon turns to the king, and the soldiers proceed to question the king’s wisdom and honor—even insulting him. Henry tries to defend the king, and in one point a soldier gets so annoyed he slaps Henry with his glove—an offense punishable by death.

But Henry never reveals himself. He just bears the insults. Why? Because he wanted to be near his men. He loves them. And he knows they couldn’t bear his presence in full glory.

There is something like this going on—although at a far greater degree—when the Son of God sits among us: allowing our ignorance, bearing our arrogance, absorbing our blows. He wants to be near us. He loves us.

**Because God is compassionate**

Jesus taught his disciples that “if you have seen me, then you have seen the Father” (John 14:9). Meaning, Jesus reveals to us God. What does this profound, chosen, humiliation of Jesus reveal to us about God? It is a display of God’s compassion. This is what God’s heart is like, toward the sorrowful and sinful. A humble attending to the needs of the lowly, rather than being opposed to greatness, turns out to be a display of it.

**Apply:** Perhaps you’ve never believed in God, nor thought much about Jesus.

- But I wonder how this image of God makes you feel—a God who would undergo such abasement, in order to draw near to you.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Philippians*, 57.

- It is said that the distance Jesus traveled from heaven into this valley of humiliation is immeasurable. And friend, that distance is the measure of God's love for you.
- And in that "immeasurable distance," as Charles Spurgeon asked, "is there no room for our gratitude?"<sup>3</sup>

[T] In the Christmas story we find ourselves; and in this story we meet the God who humbles himself. Finally, in this story we hear the call that heals the self.

### III. The Call That Heals the Self.

Text: Jesus' journey does not end in humiliation, but exaltation.

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As we've noted, this passage's vision of the future includes each one of us—"every knee, every tongue." To bow our knee to Jesus, to confess him as Lord, means both to acknowledge who He truly is, and to offer our very lives in loving service to him. This is what it means to say that Jesus Christ *is Lord*.

How does that kind of vision for your life make you feel? You are created for, and headed towards, a life focused on *honoring* someone other than yourself—in honoring Jesus Christ. If nothing else, it's quite counter-cultural.

E.g., Rieff: In 1966 Philip Rieff published his seminal work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. Rieff said we were living into a great sea-change in self-understanding—shifting from religious man, "who was born to be saved," to psychological man, "who is born to be pleased."

Born to be pleased. We go through life asking the world to make us happy—to serve our needs. Our current mental health crisis may be another sign that this way of being human is deforming us.

The call coming through the Christmas story is quite different: *you are born to please God*. And in pleasing God, the self finds its healing, and tastes a deeper pleasure.

E.g., haven't you noticed how pleasing it is to please someone you admire and respect. That's what it means to be made to bow our knees, and make our confession, to Jesus Christ as our Lord.

Apply: It seems our world is tutoring the "selves" that make it up to organize life around pride: my story, my sense of identity, my desires. How counter-cultural is the call to the "self" in the Christian story: *be humble, like your Lord*. Humbly give your life to Him. And in imitation of Him, humbly serve others. Here is a call that can heal the self.

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<sup>3</sup> As Charles Spurgeon says, "Here, in the immeasurable distance between the heaven of his glory and the shame of his death, is room for your gratitude." From <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/our-lord-in-the-valley-of-humiliation/#flipbook/>

A world ruled by pride. Or a world ordered around humility. Which would you prefer?

Close: Near the end of *The Polar Express*, just after the boy's arrived home, he stands in the doorway of his house, waving goodbye to his friends on the train. His family is asleep, the living room dark, but through the open door comes the glow from that train—and all it represents to his young heart.

Maybe that's you. Still standing in a dark world that's lost its meaning. Perhaps you wish there could be more—that there is a God who loves you, who humbles himself like Jesus Christ did at Christmas. For all of us, Christian or not, the message of Christmas is that that world does exist, has broken into our own, and the humble Lord has opened the door to each of us—he bids us to step out of a world of unbelief. To hear again, or for the first time, the ring of that bell.