

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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Jeremiah 31:7–14
John 1:1–18

INCARNATION

When you read John, it's like reading a hymn. It sounds like music. Hymns are meant to lift our spirits or convey a set of feelings that words fail us in conveying. Hymns are also meant to teach.

So what is John teaching us? What are we to learn from his hymn? For humans—all humans—there is one question that is more important than any other. One inquiry we ask incessantly—it's theological and it is our perennial question—Who is Christ? Who is Jesus Christ of Nazareth?

We know that Christ is God incarnate. But do we know what we're saying when we talk about the incarnation? First, we're saying we believe there is a God—a supreme divine being beyond our ability to fully comprehend or explain. By definition, God has to be beyond our explanation. The second thing that we are affirming is that this God is also near to us—this God even becomes one of us.

Pam Holloman tells the story that illustrates what we are saying. She tells the story about this past Christmas, in fact. The story is about her three-year-old niece, Rachel. It seems this past Christmas, Rachel received a three-foot by three-foot mesh tent and right away she set the tent up and declared it her playhouse. Rachel invited Pam to sit in her home with her. Then she explained that she (Rachel) would be the papa and then sometimes she'd be the mama, but her Aunt Pam would be the baby. They began to play. Before long Rachel broke the news that she had to go to work. And so she gathered up her things and looked at her aunt with some concern and no small amount of pity, kissed her on top of the head and told her to cry—loudly—which she did. Then Rachel strolled around the house eventually coming back to comfort her distressed child with a hug and then she told her not to cry, so Pam stopped.

Pam and Rachel lived this life again and again throughout Christmas day. The little three-year-old Rachel encountering admittedly is an over-simplification of our Christology. And yet it is a clear demonstration of God's intimate connection to our vulnerability, experiencing our life with us—God in Jesus—experiencing the ecstasies of our life and the unfairness of our life, our failures, and our victories. God is the source of our hope, that is sure. God is our relief and our consolation. God is the impetus for any transformation that we share, any change for the better in our lives. Part of what the gospel is teaching us is that God is also strong enough to be with us in our wretchedness—to be present even when our life seems futile.

This is why we know the lesson of John's hymn—the lesson of who Christ is—because the incarnation means so much to us and because of it, we don't have to pretend when

we are confronted with pain or loss or the effects of evil in our world. We don't have to deny that those are realities. God has been here before us. He has been where we are no matter how messy we have allowed life to become. God is there, and God is offering us healing.

This world of ours has accused Jesus Christ and in fact all of Christianity of being little more than a system for maintaining order. This world of ours concludes that Christianity promotes a morality and even accuses our faith of being little more than a compass to teach us right from wrong and at worst in enforcing the status quo. This is what our world says of the incarnation. But we believe that when the light came into the world in Jesus Christ, the supreme significance of our faith was more than a set of rules—more than right theology. Now, to be sure, we still believe in obedience to God. And we certainly believe that there are eternal consequences for the way in which we conduct our lives. And we of all people believe that we are created in part to address inequality in our midst. We are given persistence and a yearning that helps us seek to align our lives with the purposes of God. But first, before any of that and finally when all of that is lived out however imperfectly, we believe that faith is about a person—the one who loved us and called us to love him in return. Our faith, our life, is about Jesus Christ.

Eugene Peterson has said, "The way we come to God is the same way God comes to us." Jesus Christ. Fully God. Fully human. And later in John, Jesus says it in his own words. "" came that they might have life and have that life in abundance."

That is what today is for us. And that is what tomorrow will be. We come to God the same way God came to us. We call that Christmas. May we continue to live in its light. And may the darkness never overtake us. Amen.