

“AN INCANDESCENT FAITH,” A Christmas Eve homily delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, December 24, 2021

Congregation, we gather for a very holy night. We are here to celebrate what God did at Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago. In a humble manger, surrounded by barnyard animals, a baby was born who was destined to be the savior of the world. His mother named him Jesus, which has its roots in the Hebrew words for “one who saves.”

This was no ordinary human baby, but God’s own son. And as God’s own son he was as fully divine as he was fully human with no dividing line in between. Inspired by biblical scripture some of our most cherished Christmas carols testify to Jesus’ extraordinary nature. They speak of him as “King of Angels” or “King of Kings” who has “opened heaven’s door.” Yet the most profound and stirring testimony is found in the particularly beloved Christmas carol by Charles Wesley and Felix Mendelssohn, which we know well as “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

Informed by the opening words from the Gospel of John read tonight which talks about the Word of God becoming through Jesus a living, breathing human being, the carol’s second verse proclaims Jesus as an “incarnate deity.” (*John 1:1-14*) *Incarnate* refers to something that has flesh or meat to it. As the rest of the carol affirms, Jesus is God who in the most miraculous way takes on human flesh or body. Conversely, Jesus, though a human being like us, literally and figuratively embodies the spirit of God in the fullest, more complete possible way so that every move he makes and every word he utters becomes an expression of God’s word and God’s truth.

Now, as I talked about just last Sunday, we learn from the Old Testament that not even Moses was permitted to see God face-to-face. God actually warned the great Old Testament leader that he would die should he ever gaze directly upon the divine face or countenance. Perhaps that’s because the full sight of God is simply too awesome to confront and contemplate. (*Exodus 33:20, 23*) Later in the Old Testament, the Patriarch Jacob believed that he both encountered and wrestled with God in the dark at a place he named Peniel. (*Genesis 32:22-32*) But the face that Jacob saw was probably that of an angel, not God directly or immediately.

Yet after sending prophets and angels on unsuccessful missions to share his divine word, God, who always reserves the right to change his mind, realized that human beings needed at least a glimpse of him. Thus, in the words of Athanasius, a fourth-century Christian bishop and saint, God chose to meet humankind “half way” by revealing himself

as never before in a human person. Through the incarnation of God in Jesus, every person of faith became suddenly privileged to see something of how God looks and acts.

In Jesus, the “incarnate deity,” we behold a powerful vision of a loving God, whose compassion is as great as his sense of justice and righteousness. Revealed in human flesh, this is a God who seeks to redeem the world rather than destroy it, who wants to help, rather than condemn, his people amid their own selfishness and sin, mistakes and foolishness. By means of the incarnation and Jesus as “incarnate deity,” fully human and fully divine, God captures our attention and communicates what we need to do in order to be reconciled with him and restored to the original purposes for which he created us.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus spoke boldly for God, because he is God. More directly and effectively than ever before, Jesus communicated to us the values that God wants us to embrace and uphold as his people. The divine message comes through especially loudly and clearly in the “Sermon on the Mount,” delivered from a mountain or hilltop. It’s recorded in Matthew 5.

In this sermon Jesus proclaims that God loves the humble, the righteous, the merciful, the pure in heart, and those who reject violence and seek to live peaceably with others. (*Matthew 5:1-48*) Later, Jesus distills his divine message further. When all is said and done, God, he says, most fundamentally commands us to have love for him and one another. (*Matthew 22:37-39*) On this, Jesus affirms, all other commandments and teachings hang. In other words, if we truly have love for God and love for one another, everything else will fall into place. Shared with us by Jesus, our “incarnate deity” and savior for humankind, it’s a message that never ages, nor ceases to be relevant.

Yes, in the incarnation, God did a beautiful, generous thing in a quest to save and redeem us and this world. Yet it’s not enough for us to simply admire and celebrate the incarnation as we do at Christmas. Jesus whose whole life on earth was an incarnation continues to call upon us to undertake some incarnational efforts of our own. Being a Christian disciple is not just about believing. It’s also about doing. As Jesus’ earthly half-brother James once declared: “Faith without works is dead.” (*James 2:1-26*) Accordingly, each of us need to put some meat, some flesh, on the bones of our faith, truly living out day-to-day the values that we profess as followers of Jesus, the “incarnate deity.” As Christian men and women our lives should *embody* and *tangibly* express the virtues that Jesus held up for us all during the Sermon on the Mount and at other equally important moments in his ministry.

We may live in ugly, troubled times. But we don't have to follow the crowd and be selfish and egotistical—or honor those who are. Friends, going against the grain of our times, let's strive to be more humble, pure in heart, righteous, and loving. May we be the kind of reputable people, known to all, who sincerely contribute to the work of peace in our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, and the wider world.

As we discovered when God came to us in Jesus, the incarnational can be incandescent. Jesus brought new light and hope to the world darkened by greed, rancor, and every other kind of evil. Similarly, congregation, we can be *incandescent* as we incarnationally live out our own faith. I cherish the words Jesus spoke to ordinary people like us near the close of his Sermon on the Mount. He said: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men [and women] that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (*Matthew 5:14-16*)

Congregation, the lights of our sanctuary are beautiful, aren't they? So are the lights that adorn the front of our church, as well as all the lights we see around town in these weeks of the Advent and Christmas seasons. But when these lights of Christmas dim and all the other decorations are put away, how important it is for us to be men and women who shine with the faith of Christ. May we continue to incarnate and embody the loving, righteous of God in Christ so that in our own modest and unassuming ways we might stand as a light to our troubled, conflicted world, dispelling its gloomy darkness with an incandescent hope, love, and joy.

Merry Christmas! **Amen!**