

Is that not us this Christmas? We come today to lean in and hope that leaning in again toward the manger we might find meaning. We want to find meaning like Joseph, for the things in life that are hard to accept. We want to find meaning like Mary, for the things that interrupt our plans. We want to find meaning like the Shepherds, for our day-to-day and year-to-year tasks, and sometimes-mundane living. We lean in like the wisemen hoping to find meaning to events that are well beyond our control. Do the events of our world, that are bigger than us, truly have meaning? We lean in and again all we find is a baby. A baby wrapped in mystery and yet, when we listen maybe we too might hear the beating of angel wings. A hint that yes, this life we live has eternal significance. Yes, this life is not an accident but when lived as a gift from God and as a gift to God becomes glorious.

The Word became flesh and heaven came down and our lives matter.

Matthew O'Reilly says in the face of death there are three questions that people seem to ask. Can I be forgiven? Will someone remember me? Does my life matter?

We lean in and listen... we listen for the faint beating of angel wings and we know heaven as come down.

Let me share a poem by Ann Weems entitled

*Christmas Comes*

*Christmas comes every time we see God in others  
The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem or in Times  
Square or North Raleigh  
For Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way to  
Jerusalem determined and inevitably*

*Even now it comes in the face of hatred and warring  
No atrocity too terrible to stop it  
No Herod strong enough  
No hurt deep enough  
No curse shocking enough  
No disaster shattering enough*

*For someone on earth will see the star,  
Someone will hear angel voices,  
Someone will run to Bethlehem,  
Someone will know peace and good will:*

*The Christ will be born.*

Heaven came down... the Word became flesh and dwelled among us and we beheld His glory.



## ADVENT 2014

# Heaven Came Down

John 1:1-5, 14

TRINITY PULPIT

In a recent Ted Talk by Matthew O'Reilly, he discusses his dilemma as an EMT and a Critical Care Nurse when he meets with a patient with impending doom. Impending Doom is a little known medical term to describe people who in a moment of physical crisis realize that they are at the point of death. In his experience of responding to car crashes and other horrible accidents, he has had many times people look at him and say, "Am I going to die today?" At first he admits that he felt compelled to look the person in the eye and tell them a lie. He knew that his patient was about to die and yet he could not bring himself to speak the honest truth. He many times would either ignore the question or offer some word of hope, when really there was no hope at all.

Then one day he came upon a gravely injured man. While attending to this man that he knew that there was very little chance of him surviving, he did something he had never done before. He spoke the truth. The man looked at him and said, "Am I going to die?" O'Reilly looked him in the eye and said yes. There is nothing I can do for you in this moment. Instead of terror or fear the man simply laid his head back and took a breath, and O'Reilly said what filled his countenance was not dread but pure peace. Since that time O'Reilly has found the courage and the freedom to speak truth to those who are at the place of impending doom. He has found a way to say yes, and he says it seems that everyone is not filled with fear and dread but with peace in those moments.

In his experience, he also has noticed three patterns to those who find themselves suddenly at death's door. He says first, they seek forgiveness. Regardless of religious belief or no religious belief, they offer words of regret and the need of forgiveness. In some cases, it might simply be the regret I should have spent more time with my family instead of work, but the words of regret and a need of forgiveness is a

part of the expression.

The second pattern is the need to be remembered. O'Reilly says many times people will look at him and ask, "Will you remember me?" They want to be remembered by their children, spouse, or friends. They do not want their walk on this earth to be as footprints in the sand. Thus, here one moment and then gone and washed away by the tide. They want to be remembered.

The last pattern, according to O'Reilly, is they want to know their life had a purpose. They want to know that life had some type of meaning. While attending to a young woman in an accident, he learned she was the mother of three young girls and she stated, "I wanted to do so much more with my life." She wanted to know that her life had been meaningful.

There are three patterns for those who find themselves at the place of impending doom. They want forgiveness, to be remembered and to have purpose. As I listened to the Ted Talk program, my mind went to our text for this week. It might sound odd speaking of death at Christmas. It might be an emotional downer to come to church today ready to celebrate the birth of a baby boy, only to have the pastor begin the sermon speaking of a weighty matter like impending doom. However, the truth is our text this morning is weighty text. Our text this morning is a proclamation of the most important matter. Our text this morning is God's answer to every one of the questions or patterns that O'Reilly mentions in his Ted Talk.

John's gospel is so different than the three synoptic gospels. Mark begins with baptism and skips completely the birth narrative. It is not important to Mark where Jesus came from, because what was important to Mark was that Jesus had risen from the dead. He was God. Matthew spends some time connecting Jesus' Judaism as the promised Jewish Messiah. Matthew focuses on genealogy and the visit of the kings or magi to the baby born a King.



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Luke gives his historical and ordered account letting us know of angel's visits to Mary and Joseph's dreams. Luke recounts the human history of politics, taxes, and gives us a very human story of a family. Luke reminds us that Jesus came not to just kings and wise men, but to common folk like shepherds, who were regarded as outsiders.

John's gospel, however, begins in another time. John's gospel begins before time. John's gospel offers us the very grounding of theology in regards to Jesus. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Before there was time... there was Jesus. Before creation... there was Jesus. In fact, all that was created was created by Jesus for Jesus. It is all about Jesus. Then John makes the incredible statement of all time.

The Word that which is eternal became flesh. The difference between the two words cannot be stressed enough. The Word that was eternal, beyond creation, beyond human likeness, human frailty, and human experience became flesh. Flesh is the most basic of Greek words. It is the term that describes all that is human. It describes our bent on sinning and failure. It denotes the pain of body and deterioration of body. It speaks of the human condition with its entire struggle of provision, health and emotional well being.

The one above all time and for all time entered into time. God became like you and me. God became flesh. That is hard to comprehend, but that is the proclamation. That is the great mystery of the incarnation. God didn't just appear to be human or pretend to be human in Jesus... He became flesh. God became like you and me. He not only became like you and me, He also made His dwelling among us.

The term there is the Old Testament term of tabernacle. In the Exodus experience the Israelites had in their camp the Tent of Meetings. It was a tabernacle where the Ark of the Covenant resided and thus, the presence of God. This tabernacle was at the center of the camp. Thus, it was thought that God was there with them in the midst of them.

That is the word here for "made His dwelling among us." God came and tabernacled with His creation. Jesus was God's full presence in this world and with this world. Jesus was among us or as the name Emmanuel means "God is with us."

The question of this proclamation then is why? If this is true, then why? Why would God the eternal become flesh? Why Jesus?

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We know that one reason is out of perfect love. God so loved the world that He sent His one and only son, so that whoever would believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life. What motivated God is what always motivates God and that is pure and boundless love.

However, could it also be that Jesus' coming is an answer to the questions that plague us in our living and our dying? Matthew O'Reilly says that what he has found in common with those at the place of impending doom are these three questions. Can I be forgiven? Will I be remembered and does life have purpose? The Word became flesh is the answer to each of these questions.

O'Reilly says that the first pattern that almost everyone shares is the since of regret or sin. There is a stated need to be forgiven. Jesus came that we might be forgiven. John mentions our eternal problem. John states in just a few short verses our sin problem. He writes it in a way that we find an increasing understanding of the power of sin in our life. First, in verse 5, John writes the light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. Then, later in verse 10, John writes although Jesus made the world they did not recognize Him. Then finally, in verse 11, John writes Jesus came to His own, but they did not receive Him.

There is an ever-increasing picture of how sin separates us from God in this passage. It begins with lack of understanding. It increases to lack of recognition and culminates with rejection.

When we think on our sins and our failures for which we desire forgiveness, we discover that they fall into these categories. There are some failures that are a lack of understanding. We just did not realize how important that moment was to another. We did not realize that time spent on this priority was more important than the priority we had set. We did not understand all that God had for our lives. We live with some regrets because of lack of understanding. We sin against God because we lack understanding of what God expects and hopes for our lives.

Some of our regrets and failures are due to lack of recognition. That is missed opportunities. So many moments come and go in life and we do not recognize their potential until the moment passes.

It is as Ann Lamont likes to say "every moment is bush a blazing but we miss it." We fail to recognize Christ in the poor and needy. We fail to recognize Christ in the weeping and grieving. We fail to recognize Christ in the wealthy and rejoicing. We fail to recognize Christ in

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our spouse, our children, our brothers and sisters. We sometimes sadly fail to recognize Christ in the person sitting right next to us in church. We do not recognize Him and yet He comes day after day and moment after moment. We miss Him. When we do we fail. We sin. We need forgiveness.

The final term is that of rejection. Jesus came to His own and they rejected Him. There is sadness in these verses. It is the sadness of a God who loves and yet is not understood, unrecognized and then rejected. Sin really is the rejection of God. Sin at its root is to reject God's plan, God's existence, God.

John describes our state well in these few verses and we realize we need forgiveness. Can we be forgiven? John answers this important question with "yet to all who received Him to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of god." When all seemed lost because of our failure and sin God had a plan. When all seemed hopeless John says all is not hopeless. If you believe, if you do accept Jesus... forgiveness is offered.

The first question people ask is about forgiveness, according to Matthew O'Reilly. John says the Word became flesh, so we might be forgiven of our failure. My friends we have sinned against God. We have not understood, we have failed to recognize Him; we have sometimes outright rejected Him. Yet, God sent Jesus to us so that we might be forgiven and we might be the children of God. Is there an answer to my failure? Yes, the answer is Jesus. That is why Heaven came down.

The second question is about being remembered. We go to great lengths to be remembered. The question of the young man to the O'Reilly rings close to home. Will you remember me? We want to be remembered by someone. That is why we have headstones, brick, buildings, pictures, letters, and memorials. It is our quest for life to be lasting. We want to live beyond our lifetime. We do not want to be forgotten. Yet, here is the hard truth... most of us will be forgotten in a short time, if not in some time. There have been billions of people who have come and gone on this planet and most of them known to a very few. Most of them have not been remembered. The Bible describes our lives this way "we are like the flower of the field that blooms and is gone and the wind blows over it and not only are we gone, but the place where we were planted is gone." In other words, we live our lives here and yet it does not take long for they're not to be a trace of us. Yet, we long to be remembered.

THERE ARE THREE PATTERNS FOR THOSE WHO FIND THEMSELVES AT THE PLACE OF IMPENDING DOOM. THEY WANT FORGIVENESS, TO BE REMEMBERED AND TO HAVE PURPOSE.

Here is the good news... We are remembered by God. In the Old Testament there are several references that simply say and God remembered. God remembered Noah when he was adrift on the water in the ark with all the animals. God did not forget Noah, but remembered Noah. Rachel in her bareness, God remembered Rachel. Joseph in prison for something he did not do and forgotten by his former cell mate, but God remembered Joseph. In the Old Testament, this phrase does not mean that God somehow suffers from short-term memory loss on occasion. The phrase "and then God remembered" is a reference to God's loving activity toward someone. We are reminded that God remembers and turns His creative activity toward the life of one who is adrift, despondent in despair, lost and forgotten by others. When no one remembers, God remembers with God's attention and action. No wonder when the thief was dying on the cross next to Jesus he would look at Jesus and say "Lord remember me."

I wish that John had one more verse in his prologue. I wish prior to verse 14 we could read and God looked down on His creation dark by sin, adrift from their poor choices, despondent from their despair, forgotten by others, and remembered them. And then, the Word became flesh. For heaven came down and we recall that God remembers us.

The third question is meaning. Does my life have meaning? Fredrick Buechner says that Advent is the time before the beginning. It is the adventure before the journey. This is the time for leaning in and seeing if there is in the manger meaning.... real meaning. Buchner suggests that whole nativity story is the story of people who were looking for meaning.

Joseph leans in looking for meaning in the fact that Mary is having a child and it is not his child. Mary is leaning in looking for meaning in the fact that her life has been interrupted with God's great plan. The shepherds are leaning in trying to determine if in the manger there might be more meaning to a life that is filled with the mundane of everyday work and season-to-season with sheep. The wise men lean in to find meaning to astrological phenomenon. Everyone is leaning in toward the manger and wondering is there meaning only to find a baby. They are looking for the meaning of everything and they find a baby. Yet, as Buechner describes it, they look for meaning and find only a baby, a mystery, and the beat of angel wings.