

Christmas
("How the Church Changes the World," Part 2)

Acts 17

Pastor Peter Hiett

December 10, 2006

Since the sermon is on the topic of Christmas, it's probably not appropriate for children.

[The worship band sings...]

"One of Us "

(Music & lyrics by Eric Bazilian)

If God had a name, what would it be, and would you
Call it to His face if you were faced with Him in
All His glory, what would you ask if you had
Just one question

Yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make His way home

If God had a face, what would it look like
And would you want to see,
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like Heaven and in Jesus
And the Saints and all the Prophets and...

Yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make His way home

What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make His way home
Back up to Heaven all alone
Nobody callin' on the phone
'Cept for the Pope maybe in Rome

Yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

[A film clip is shown from Austin Powers. Dr. Evil and Mini Me are singing “One of Us.” At the end of the song everyone claps and Dr. Evil says, “I wrote that.”]

Actually, Dr. Evil didn’t write that. Joan Osborne did.¹ But maybe really it was Jesus. You know, God will use agnostics and pagans. He even uses evil to build altars to the unknown god.

Listen to the lyrics...

“If God had a name, what would it be?
What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus”

What if?

Last week we began preaching on Acts 17 and our philosophy of ministry, “How the Church Changes the World.” We talked about the Word of God building altars to the unknown God that we might find them and proclaim Gospel.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

He proclaims the Word... Jesus. He places the body broken, blood shed upon their altar. He places the baby in their manger. He preaches the Gospel, but how? In what language? In what form? In what incarnation is the Word revealed?

Next verse...

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being”; [that’s Epimenides, the pagan philosopher] as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring” [that’s Aratus, the Greek poet].

Paul spoke Greek, not Hebrew.

He didn’t quote the Bible, but Epimenides and Aratus.

He even used the Greek style of dialogue to arrive at the altar to the unknown God, and

then proposed that Jew and Greek were both seeking the same God because both are His offspring.

Many liberal scholars postulate Paul could never have said these things. It's too Greek. Conservative scholars have to believe he said them. So many argue this is an inerrant record of an errant sermon for how could Paul sound so Greek? How could he identify so deeply with pagans? How could he identify so deeply with the world?

Aren't we supposed to be radically different from the world?
Is Paul betraying our club?

What is Paul doing?

Maybe Paul is doing what he said he always did.
1 Corinthians 9:19-23,

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

So to the Greeks, Paul became as a Greek.

And it wasn't hypocrisy but humility for Paul humbled himself and took the form of a Greek and being found in Grecian form, he preached the Word. Next verse.

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." [See, even as he preached, the Word judged them.] So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

And so what happened? The Word was born in some stinky Greek mangers, right? The Word was in Paul, in-fleshed in Paul, right? (He was Christ's body.) Then the Word took on flesh named Dionysius and Damaris. The eternal seed took root in some Greek dirt, pagan dirt, some real crap (fertile manure).

See, it was Christmas on Mars Hill. Christmas in Paul and then Christmas in some

Greeks.

Jesus said (John 20:21), “As the Father sent me so I send you.” How did the Father send Him? Well, Jesus humbled Himself, took on the form of a slave, born in the likeness of man.

We are to “have this mind among ourselves,” (Philippians 2:5) the mind of Christmas. Christo missio. Christ’s mission. Christmas. The problem is we naturally hate Christ-mass, Christmas. We love Santa Clause, elves, and eggnog ‘cause they help us forget Christmas.

So I want to remind you of Christ mass, Christmas. In the words of Larry the Sheep guy from last Christmas Eve: “Concept A, Concept B, and Concept C.”

Concept A:

“A” stands for A+, anti-septic, alleluia-amen, and ’agios, the Greek word for holy. God is holy. Picture Concept “A” over here. [Peter walks to the right side of the stage.]

For thousands of years before that first Christmas, God had been building an altar in the midst of the people Israel, revealing that He is unlike us. He is clean. He’s pure. He’s righteous. He’s holy.

When Israel wandered in the wilderness God made it clear that the Israelites had to excrete outside the camp. And anyone with a bodily discharge or who had contact with the dead must be placed outside the camp for God dwells in the camp.

So when a woman gave birth, her placenta was unclean and so she was unclean. She was only made clean through the sacrifice of a lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtle dove for a sin offering. The body of the sin offering was disposed of outside the camp by the priest.² But the burnt offering was consumed on the altar by God.

If the woman could not afford a lamb, the law stipulated that two pigeons or two turtle doves would do. When Mary gave birth to Jesus, this is what she offered. She was so poor she could not afford a lamb... amazing.

Well, think of Concept “A” over here [right side of the stage]... the holiness of God, purity, cleanliness, absolutely no death, decay, or excrement.

If we were to see God now in all His manifest glory, these old bodies of flesh would be consumed, like an ice cube dropped into the heart of the sun.

You see, it’s not that the holy can’t tolerate the unholy, so much as the unholy is utterly devoured by the presence of God. And we, ourselves, are unholy.

Concept B:

“B” stands for booger, burp, bad gas, bottom, butt, behind, barn.

When I think of “barn,” I think of my grandpa’s barn (Grandpa Ralph). I’ve told you about my grandpa. He’s responsible for all the broken irrigation equipment in hell. I heard him send it there time and time again as a kid.

Grandpa said a lot of words that I did not say, that I was not allowed to say. He had this one word for excrement that was shorter, more to the point, and even sounded like what it described. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone use that word as much as

Grandpa. And it makes some sense. You see, my grandpa was a farmer in Nebraska. His barn was full of that substance.

With my cousins, he milked 100 plus head of cattle two times everyday. There was usually 2-3 inches of hot, steaming manure that covered the floor of the barn.

My cousins and my little sister, Rachel, used to walk in it barefoot. I was horrified. (I told you about my poo phobia.) I was scandalized by the barn.

It was on the farm by the barn that I saw my first birth. My uncle Rodney had me help him deliver a calf. There was blood, flies, pain, and this horrid looking thing called a placenta.

I saw birth. I saw death. I remember kicking a dead calf. It dissolved into maggots. Unclean. In the barn between birth and death that's where we live. That's Concept "B."

Well, the very epicenter of grossness, the heart of unclean on the farm in the barn was a trough. It was the feed trough where the cows would feed while they were being milked. It was full of flies and slobber. The sides were lined with mucous, saliva, and encrusted feed. It always creeped me out.

Well, there is a word for that trough in Greek. It's "phatne." Most English Bibles translate that with the word "manger." Now listen to scripture. Luke 2:7,

And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.

The wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of peace...

She "laid him in a manger for there was no room in the inn."

She laid Concept "A" (Him) in a manger... outside the camp, outside the city, outside the temple.

In a manger, like an altar, a hope, a fear, a longing, a question that had been prepared from the foundation of the world.

She laid him in a manger.

Concept A + Concept B = Concept C, Christmas

Logos in carnos = the incarnation

The Word in meat. Carnos means meat.

God in flesh—human flesh, that sweats, excretes, breaks, bleeds, and dies.

See the scandal?

Down through the ages, it's safe to say no doctrine has produced more heresy than the doctrine of the incarnation.

People believe that Jesus was God, but not really man

or

that He was man, but not really God.

Well, our orthodox Christian confession is that Jesus was *fully* God and *fully* man.

We confess it with our lips, although we're still scandalized at heart. I mean, just look at what we've made of Christmas. It's no wonder that Joan Osborne sings, "What if

God was one of us?” And everybody just sings along even while surrounded by Christmas.

They can’t believe the baby in the manger was God or more likely they can’t believe the baby in the manger was “one of us” because He sure doesn’t look like a slob or a stranger on the bus.

I mean, check out these nativity scenes, standard nativity scenes sold in Christian bookstores and gift shops around our country.

This doesn’t look like my grandpa’s barn.

<Photo> Nativity (Precious Moments)

See any after birth, any flies, any poop?

<Photo> Snowglobe nativity

That’s just freaky.

<Photo> Santa at nativity

We used to have one of these. It was really cool, but it didn’t remind me of the barn.

<Photo> Candles around nativity topped with a propeller

This one seemed the most authentic, but I still don’t see any poop. I’ve looked at thousands of nativity scenes, and I haven’t seen one poop.

<Photo> Rustic Nativity

<Photo> Cartoony Nativity

You’d think they could at least make one little wooden poop, one toy poop... a five year old could understand that.

<Photo> Hummel Nativity

This is a Hummel. It costs \$1,162.95, and not one poop. . . I guess that makes some sense: Who wants to pay that much for poop?

<Photo> Porcelain Nativity

And check this out... that’s like a golden feed trough. And what’s this behind the baby?

Do people know what that is? Not jewelry, but one of the most sadistic instruments of torture this world has ever produced. Do you see what we do with “the scandal of this

world?”

No wonder Joan Osborne sings in all sincerity,

What if God was one of us...
If God had a face, what would it look like
And would you want to see,
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints

I think she means this stuff [Peter points to the nativity scenes]. You see, she can't see Jesus 'cause of this stuff. And maybe we make this stuff so we won't either. See we're scandalized by Christmas. We've turned crosses into jewelry, painted the manger, and gilded it in gold.

We hide the manger,
but when we hide the manger,
we hide the baby,
and when we hide the baby,
we hide the Gospel,
and when we hide the Gospel,
we do the work of the evil one.

Scandalized by the cross and scandalized by Christians,
we hide from Christmas
and hide Christmas from the world.

But Christmas is Concept A + Concept B. Amen?
That's right.

Christmas is God and shit.

Now stop. In the name of Jesus, don't close your ears, don't shut down. In case you're thinking...

“He's angry.”

I don't think I'm angry.

“He's trying to be cutting edge.”

I hope not.

Some may be thinking, “Now I can say that word, shock my mom, and blame the pastor.”

Please don't. That kind of rebellion is sin.

Some may think, “That word is sin. You said a cuss word. You said a swear word.”

I don't know what a “cuss” word is. Maybe you mean “curse” word. Well, I didn't curse. Cursing is gossip, slander, or calling someone a fool. We do that all the time. But I didn't curse, and I didn't swear. I don't think there's any such thing as a “cuss” word or a “swear” word.

And some say, “Well, it’s a filthy word.”

Well, it is the word that communicates the idea of filth, and it does a pretty good job.

I think it’s the word Paul would have used in Philippians when he said that he “considered his old religious accomplishments as ‘skubula.’” Not worth... that word.

I think it’s the word Jesus would have used in Luke when He told the parable of the tree (the people) that wouldn’t bear fruit. And He said, “Throw some ‘koprión’ on it.” That word... on it.

My farmer grandpa would have understood that word. See, I think it’s the word Grandpa used to describe Concept “B.”

Now some of you may say, “Fine, I don’t want to argue Greek grammar, and definitions, and what filthy talk is or isn’t. I just want you to know [this is what people say in letters], when you said that word, I shut down, I just shut down.”

Well, in the name of Jesus, please don’t shut down! Why? Because you’ll miss Christmas. And if you miss Christmas, you miss Jesus. For where is Jesus? He’s outside the camp, covered in mucous, blood, and birth water. They just laid Him in a feed trough in a barn surrounded by “that word.” Now, I won’t say “that word” again, so please don’t stress.

But, you see, my grandpa said “that word” all the time. This is his picture. (And yes, that is a live deer in the living room.)



Grandpa said “that word” all the time. He used it as a noun, a verb, an adjective, and adverb, “I ‘that word’ you not.”

Sociologists claim that of all the words considered inappropriate by polite society around the world, teenagers use “that word” more than any. Translated differently, of course, but they’re all saying something about their world, about our world.

Do you listen? Or do you shut down?

Well, my grandpa used “that word” all the time and every time he did, I shut down ‘cause “that word” told me, “Grandpa is outside the camp, and you don’t want to be outside the camp... the club.”

I believe he really loved me, actually adored me. But I always seemed to shut down. And I remember I always wanted to tell him about Jesus. Grandpa didn’t think much of Jesus. Actually, he didn’t think much of all the followers of Jesus, organized religion, that is. In other words, Christianity kept him from Christ.



I've really mourned the fact that Grandpa died before I grew up in my faith... my faith in Jesus and not a camp or a club. 'Cause when he said "that word" I always shut down, and I sent this message, "My Jesus doesn't have anything to do with 'that word' or your world."

And here's the irony, "that word" was like an altar in the middle of his world. I could've said,

Grandpa, Jesus was born in "that word." Grandpa, Jesus was born in a barn like yours. Grandpa, He was born in a feed trough like yours, and He wants to be born in a heart like yours and like mine. Grandpa, He died for all your "that word" and all my "that word." 'Cause all our fancy, religious deeds aren't worth "that word." Grandpa, that's how much Jesus loves you.

I could've said that, but I shut down. I didn't *see* Christmas, so I couldn't *be* Christmas for Grandpa. I shut down on Mars Hill. I shut down. Why?

'Cause I confused my culture with my Christ.

That's idolatry.

You know, we all have a culture, and American evangelicals certainly have a culture. We hang out in certain places with certain people who dress a certain way. We have our own schools, radio stations, TV stations, T-shirts, and even diet books. We have "Praise the Lord" clocks, Christian fish bumper stickers, and Bible breath mints with scripture printed on the wrappers.

We don't drink, or smoke, or chew, or go with girls that do.

Granted, we slander, gossip, curse, and swear, over eat, hoard money, but we do it in culturally acceptable ways .Always saying grace before we eat too much, thanking

God for our ability to hoard money.

We have a special vocabulary we use when we gossip and slander, so it sounds like prayer.

And get this, we can say certain potty words but not others. I see absolutely no logical reason that the word “poop” should be okay, and Grandpa’s word not be okay.

But by making a distinction, we can quickly judge people and feel good about ourselves.

You see, the Bible doesn’t have enough rules and the right rules. So we like to make up rules, laws, customs, and traditions like the Pharisees.

Jesus said of them,

“In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.”

And what is the commandment of God?

In one word... love.

Now nothing’s wrong with traditions and culture. Indeed, they can be very good. But when I get my culture confused with my Christ, it’s idolatry. And serving an idol, I lose sight of Christ. I lose sight of Christmas. Christmas is the sacrifice of culture for the cause of Christ.

Jesus left the culture of heaven, His home in heaven, and emptied Himself to be born a slave, a man. He ate our food, wore our clothes, and spoke our language. He spoke about sheep to shepherds, fish to fishermen, and seeds to farmers. He cried our tears, and in the end, bore our sins.

He said, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.”

So Paul writes, “I have become all things to all men so I might by all means save some.”

In other words...

As Christ became “incarnate,”

Paul became “in-Greek-ate.”

I could’ve become “in-Grandpa-ate.”

You’re called to become “in-neighbor-ate.”

If you want to share the Gospel with your husband, become “in-husband-ate.” Don’t force him to enter your world, enter his world. Look for altars to the unknown god. Speak the word, be the Word

If you want to reach teenagers with the Gospel, become ‘in-teenager-ate.’ Shave your head, burp the Star Spangled Banner, and don’t shut down when one says, “I feel like ‘that word.’”

If you want to reach prostitutes, do you have to become a prostitute? No, but Jesus hung out with them, befriended them, loved them.

Paul said, “To those outside the Law, I became as one outside the Law, not being without Law toward God but under the Law of Christ.”

In other words,
become as incarnate as love demands and
become as incarnate as love allows.

We’re to be “in the world but not of the world.”
Usually, we’re *in* the world *and of* the world, or
not in the world *and not of* the world, but
Jesus was *in* the world *and not of* the world.

He radically identified with the world, yet was radically separated from the world. He looked like us, walked like us, talked like us, dressed like us. “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him,” said Isaiah.

That is, you couldn’t tell Him apart by His dress shirts, bumper stickers, or vocabulary. And so what was the difference? His love. He is love incarnate.

Jesus said, “They will know you by your love.” Not your T-shirts, bumper stickers, and choice of potty words.

In other words, Concept A doesn’t change.

Concept A is God, and God is love.

Concept B changes all the time. Your barn, your culture, your home, your body, your life.

To sacrifice your Concept B to enter another’s Concept B with Concept A is Christmas...
the Word preached.

Love manifest

Mercy revealed

Christ in a manger

The divine communication: Christ-mass, Christmas.

So Paul entered Athens.

He entered their world,
and he found their altar to the unknown god.

And there he proclaimed Christ,
in the Greek language,
in Greek style,
using Greek ideas,
quoting Greek philosophers.

Paul became the medium that Christ would be the message. (In some cities, even Paul’s body was broken and his blood was shed. Paul was the body of Christ.)

Concept A in Concept B on Mars Hill

Christmas on Mars Hill

The Incarnation

Well, I could tell you hundreds of missions stories, youth group stories, and counseling stories all illustrating my point, but we don't have time. And you still might say, "Okay, but what about me? And why did you have to use 'that word?'"

Okay, let's say you're riding on the bus, and the guy next to you says, "I'm frickin' tired of this whole God damned world!"

What do you do?

Shut down? (Like during the sermon.)

Do you say, "Excuse me, but we don't say that word. We're Christians." That is, "We're in; you're out. And we're better than you."

Do you say, "I'm offended, scandalized!"

Or, in silence, do you look for an altar to the unknown god? Do you look for a place you can relate? Do you find a language?

'Cause you could say, "Wow, dude, you're so right! I mean, God really did damn this world. Most people deny it, but you said it. He damned this world, but I'm tellin' you, I think He did it in hope."

The guy looks confused and says, "Whatever, man, but this world is full of 'that word.'"

And you say, "You're totally right, and dude, it's where I live, and that's exactly where God was born, to fill me with faith, hope, and love."

And the guy says, "What the hell are you talking about?"

And you say, "Not hell, Christmas. You mean to tell me, you've never heard of Christmas?"

Well, I don't think most people have... have you?

You know, some people shut down at just the mention of "that word" 'cause they're trying to hide their own "that word." Usually they're trying to hide it with good deeds, religion, culture, and Christmas kitsch. But if you hide the barn to hide the skubula, to hide the manger, you hide Christmas. You hide the Christ child.

Where is He?

You'll find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in your own stinky manger.

So tell the guy on the bus about Christmas, your Christmas. Say, "Let me tell you about some serious crap, my crap, and then let me tell you about the One that was born there. Let me tell you about the love of God: Jesus."

And so, in the midst of our crap, in the midst of our failure, in the depths of a God damned world, on that night He was betrayed, Jesus took bread and He broke it saying, "This is my body given to you. Take it. Eat it. Do it in remembrance of me." And in the same way after supper and having given thanks, He took the cup and He said, "This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it. Do it in remembrance of me."

And so we invite you to come to the table, tear off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup. Black cups are wine; purple cups are juice. They're both mercy.

In other words, surrender your manger.

Pray this with me. You can just pray it silently in your heart after me.

Lord Jesus, to you I surrender my crap, I surrender my manger. I surrender that thing I try to hide from everybody else and from You. I surrender the depths of me. Come Lord Jesus and make my manger Your kingdom.

COMMUNION

Now before you go, let me say, Paul talked a lot about putting stumbling blocks before young believers. That's why I spent so much time explaining what I said so that young believers can grow rather than stumble.

However, Paul and Jesus both seemed to go out of their way to put stumbling blocks before Pharisees so that they would come to meet the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

And he also said this, "Don't let your freedom be a pretext for evil." And so remember that wherever you go, you are called to be a missionary to the people you meet and to say whatever blesses them the most, whatever is the most loving thing to say. And if by chance you sit on a bus with an old man smoking a cigar, in suspenders, and he uses bad potty words, don't shut down. Just listen. Look for an altar and speak Gospel.

That's our philosophy of ministry. It's called the incarnation. It's called Christmas. And on the inside of your bulletin, we printed it up.

If you would, pick up your bulletin and let's just read it together. The middle section.

"How the Church Changes the World"

INCARNATION - Jesus is God in flesh (in-carnos). The Church is Christ Jesus in us. He said, "As the father sent me, so I send you." Animated by His Spirit, we seek to preach Christ, the unchanging Truth, in ever changing styles, forms, and language of our culture. Not in a false religious culture, created by arrogance. That is, we don't want to play church, but be church.

AUTHENTICITY - The power and glory of God is manifest in the weakness of His people. His power and glory is Jesus. Jesus is love in flesh, the manifestation of mercy. We are His body, the presence of God's grace and the story of His mercy over you is unique and priceless. It is the Gospel according to you. Christ, the Word, in you.

CHRIST IN YOU - Institutions, programs, and professionals don't redeem the world, but Christ in you, the Church, does. Through our programs we hope to equip you for the work of the ministry. Christ changing you, and Christ in you changing the world.

And then at the very top of the statement, and I'll just read this, it says this:

First line: The genuine Lookout Mountain Community Church is God's creation. She's the glory of God born in a stable. We are the stable. Jesus is the glory of God. When we're honest about the stable, we can be honest about the glory. Real Church in this unReal World.

And so, in the name of Jesus, believe Christmas, and then you can be Christmas to

a world desperate for Jesus. In His name, amen.

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Relevant Texts and Quotations (from bulletin)

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

~ *Acts 17:22-34*

Birth pangs are felt in polished pulpits as once they were in a crude manger. Preaching the Word of God involves pain—for both preacher and hearers. What flows through one person's mouth into the heart of another, after all, is the Word of the wholly other God, and that's bound to create a disturbance along the way.

~ *Donald W. McCullough,*
The Trivialization of God

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

~ *John 1:14*

You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

~ *Deuteronomy 23:12-14*

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell." And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.

~ *Numbers 5:1-4*

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. . . . And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.'"

~ *Leviticus 12:1-4, 12:6-8*

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. . . . And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

~ *Luke 2:7, 2:21-24*

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

~ *Hebrews 13:10-13*

In Islam, as Kenneth Cragg has helped us to see, Allah sends -- angels, prophets, books, --but he is too holy to come. For God to touch earth is, in Islam, called shirk, and anyone who claims that God has a Son or became a human being or anything like a human being commits shirk, makes God gross, blasphemes God's glory. But in the gospel we have learned to think of God in another way. The gospel's God is precisely so great that he can come down. He is not trapped in heaven above us. And this God's love is so immense that he wants to come down. And he has proven his love by the fact that he did come down and touch our ground. Indeed, he even allowed himself to be "shirked" by men, condemned, and nailed to wood. . . . Christmas is the story of God becoming one of us. God literally "be-littled" himself in order to accommodate himself to us. . . . And that condescension, that great stoop we call Christmas, or in theology, the incarnation, is the fulfillment of every Old Testament promise of God's coming. Christmas is God's own self-shirking.

~ *Frederick Dale Bruner, The Christbook*

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

~ *John 20:21*

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

~ *Philippians 2:5-8*

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

~ *1 Corinthians 9:19-23*

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"

~ *Mark 7:1-9*

Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." . . . Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

~ *Matthew 16:6, 23:12-15*

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

~ *John 13:35*

Mahatma Ghandi once said, "I like your Christ but I don't like your Christians." He gave this reason, "They are so unlike your Christ." . . . What a strange breed of Christianity the law has ushered in and what little resemblance it bears to the Good News of Jesus Christ!

~ *Brennan Manning, Lion and Lamb*

Not Herod, not Caiaphas, not Pilate, not Judas ever contrived to fasten upon Jesus Christ the reproach of insipidity; that final indignity was left for pious hands to inflict. To make of his story something that could neither startle, nor shock,

nor terrify, nor excite, nor inspire a living soul is to crucify the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame . . . Let me tell you, you Christian people, an honest writer would be ashamed to treat a nursery tale as you have treated the greatest drama of history.

~ *Dorothy Sayers*

The established Church is far more dangerous to Christianity than any heresy or schism. We play at Christianity. We use all the orthodox Christian terminology -- but everything, everything without character. Yes, we are simply not fit to shape a heresy or a schism. There is something frightful in the fact that the most dangerous thing of all, playing at Christianity, is never included in the list of heresies and schisms.

~ *Soren Kierkegaard*

Author Tony Campolo, who makes a regular circuit as a chapel speaker on Christian college campuses, for a time used this provocation to make a point. "The United Nations reports that over ten thousand people starve to death each day, and most of you don't give a s _ _ _ . However, what is even more tragic is that most of you are more concerned about the fact that I just said a bad word than you are about the fact that ten thousand people are going to die today." The responses proved his point: in nearly every case Tony got a letter from the chaplain or president of the college protesting his foul language. The letters never mentioned world hunger.

~ *Philip Yancey*

Tony Campolo did a presentation on a study sociologists did on swear words that kids use internationally. They wanted to see if there were any swear words that the kids used in common. What they found was the number one swear word that kids use (translated differently of course) is "s _ _ _ ." Our challenge is to give kids permission to feel s _ _ _ _ y in our presence.

~ *Richard Van Pelt*

I didn't go to the flea market the week of my abortion. I stayed home, and smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little. . . . On the seventh night, though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. . . . Several hours later, the blood stopped flowing, and I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there--of course, there wasn't. But after awhile, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with. Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone. This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "F _ _ _ it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.

And here in dust and dirt, O here,

The lilies of his love appear.

[George Herbert]

~ *Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies*