

"Christmas at LMCC "

Acts 17:16-31

Peter Hiett

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SONG "What if God was one of us?" by Joan Osborne

*If God had a name what would it be,
And would you call it to His face?
If you were faced with Him and all His glory;
What would you ask if you had just one question?
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?*

*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?
Trying to make His way home,
Back up to heaven all alone.
Nobody calling on the phone,
'Cept maybe the Pope maybe in Rome.*

*Yeah, yeah, yeah...
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?
Just trying to make His way home,
Like a holy rolling stone,
Back up to heaven all alone.
Just trying to make His way home.
Nobody calling on the phone
'Cept for the Pope maybe in Rome.*

Message

In a short mini-series, a two-part docu-drama, having to do with our session's work on defining the statement of ministry for our church, I am preaching from Acts, chapter 17. Last week we talked about the fact that God made each of us to worship him. That's what we were made for, but the fall separated us from God. We live in a world separated from God and yet are creatures that were born to worship.

But the things of this world do not satisfy. We each have a place within us, if we don't know Jesus already, where, I believe, we have constructed an altar to our unknown god somehow. Each of us has an emptiness—a wound left by our separation from God.

At the end, we listened to that song by Joan Osborne, climbing the charts last week to number six. The first verse is an example of that altar to the unknown god in our world and in our community when she sings, "*What if God was one of us? What would his name be? What if he was one of us?*"

But how do you answer her question when the next verse says, "*And if you were to see his face or face of God, would you want to see, if seeing meant you had to believe in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets?*"

She's completely blind to the fact that we say, "*Well yes, Jesus was God, one of us, come to us.*" She can't picture Jesus was one of us—and I'm not sure I blame her.

This guy walks around with robes and sandals, always looking like he's stoned in our Jesus movies. He only quotes King James Bible verses. He's really not one of us. And what about heaven? Who wants to go to heaven and sit on a cloud forever and play a harp?

So, the world asks the question "*What if God was one of us?*" and we hear it, but how do we answer the question?

And that's really our question this morning. You'll remember that last week I told the story of how Athens was being devastated by a plague, and they got the Cretan, pagan philosopher, Epimenides, to come to their town. He got them to sacrifice and to pray to this unknown god and erect altars all around Mars Hill. The plague lifted, and over time

they forgot the unknown god. But they preserved one altar in the hopes that, one day, this unknown god would reveal his name and they would know this god had not been a stranger to their town, to their city.

Five hundred years later (Acts 17, starting in verse 22), the apostle Paul, standing in the middle 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 an 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 shrines made by man, nor is He served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he, himself, gives to all men life and breath and everything.

And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet He is not far from each one of us for

"In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your poets (Epimenides) have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'

Being, then God's offspring we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, or representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men 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 men by raising him from the dead.

That causes some controversy. Some believe, some don't. Let's pray: "Lord God, we thank You for the way You have loved us. God, I pray that You would help us to look to You for direction now, to imitate You, Lord Jesus, to learn what You would teach us. Help us to be the church that You desire us to be. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This speech Paul gives in Acts chapter 17, the aero-padaka, is probably the most controversial passage in the book of Acts. Liberal scholars have a hard time with it, as do conservative scholars. It all centers around the fact Paul is just so darn Greek in the way he explains the gospel. Liberal scholars say, "There's no way Paul did that. It's a later addition to the text or something because Paul would never be that Greek." Conservative scholars on the other hand, believing the Bible to be authoritative, which it is, believe we must believe it happened—it's "an inerrant account of an errant sermon."

In other words, it's a flawless account of a messed up sermon, Paul blew it when he was in Athens because he was so Greek.

He didn't quote any Scripture.

He quoted Epimenides, a pagan.

He spoke favorably of their religious quest rather than putting the pagans in their place.

He used Greek terms and a Greek style of preaching, rather than Hebrew.

He spoke about the altar to the unknown god rather than speaking about the Lamb of God that was slain. "It's an authoritative account of a lousy sermon."

That's what some people say.

But you'd think that Luke would clue us in this is a bad example. I have more faith in Luke, and in Scripture, and in Paul than that, and I think it's meant to be a model for us. Paul's doing what he explains in his letter to the Corinthians—he's living out one of the most spectacular doctrines of the Christian faith.

To explain it to you, I have to tell you about two other things, concept A and concept B. Concept A plus concept B equal concept C. Concept A is my grandfather's dairy farm in North Luke, Nebraska. We would go there every summer on vacation and it's the grossest place I've ever been. If your wife is into that country stuff, guys, and she wants to buy all those wooden ducks and stuff, just take her to North Luke, Nebraska, my grandpa's farm. She'll be over it in a wink! We would park the car out in front of the house and it would change color overnight just from fly specs; it was amazing.

I know all farms are not like this, but being a dairy farm, there was manure everywhere. And my relatives were gross! They would walk barefoot in it all over the place. And the barn where they milked the cows was the worst. My relatives milked the cows barefoot! They put the cows' heads in these things that clamped down on them while they ate.

What they ate out of was the grossest thing of all on the farm, I thought.

It was a food trough that had grain in it and the sides were coagulated with dried cow fluids, feed, flies, and stuff like that. And if that grosses you out, that's good, 'cause that's concept A—the dairy farm. It's not necessarily evil or bad, it's just gross!

And over here is something completely different. Concept B is this: God—the ground of all being—the source of all beauty, and light, and truth, and justice—The One that you were made to worship! Any goodness, any beauty, any longing you see as you look out at the mountains is only a faint reflection of the character of God, and the goodness of God, and the beauty of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Glory.

If you bring concept B and concept A together, worlds collide, #X%&*!

Do you know what it's called? Christmas! The incarnation!

When God decided to reveal himself ultimately to us, he didn't do it with golden tablets. He didn't do it with the *Ten Commandments*, like he did before with the Israelites on some mountain. But he decided to come to us—and not as a king or as a prince. He didn't have a parade or a background music ensemble; he decided to come to peasants *as a peasant born*.

If you've ever seen someone born, you know it is a humiliating experience. I know it's hard on you moms, but that baby really has it tough. We block it out of our memory. But He was born! And He was born in a barn--with flies, manure, smells and animals. He was born to peasants. Shepherds were there, and they are slobs.

It was a mess, and it hurt.

And when He was born, they took God and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and they laid him in a food trough! That's mind boggling. I don't think I can even begin to take it in. I worry we have been so inoculated with small doses of our faith—with those little Hallmark nativity scenes and Hummel sets with the shepherds and kings (they weren't even there yet officially).

Everything is so nice and pretty and cute.

There's no manure, flies, or smells.

It doesn't look a thing like my grandfather's barn.

The incarnation: God, Author of life, King of Kings, the Prince of Peace in a food trough crying for his mother's milk.

The incarnation. In Latin, "incarnus" means 'in meat.' Blood dripping meat! Flesh! And God remained incarnate with us 33 years! What is so utterly shocking about Jesus is he's so utterly unshocking. So normal! That's what the Pharisees had a problem with. He hung out with tax collectors and sinners. They called him a glutton and a drunkard.

He enjoyed people and he dressed like normal people, *so incarnate*. Down through the ages it's safe to say the scandal of his incarnation has produced more heresies than anything else. People can believe that Jesus was God, but not really a man. *He must have been acting*. Or they can believe he was a man who did some godly stuff. The Orthodox faith has always had to defend that he was fully God and fully man like Scripture describes. Even until today.

The incarnation is, I think—a scandal. Our cults, our nativity scenes, our Jesus movies—you know the ones—Jesus walks around, and all he does is quote Bible verses in the King James version. He floats. He never says, "Hey guys, I'm hungry. Let's go get a sandwich," or "I gotta use the restroom, I'll catch up with you later."

But, you know that's true!

It's no wonder Joan Osborne rules him out as a candidate for "one of us."
Maybe we really don't want him to be one of us.
Maybe we don't want him to be *that real* and *that relevant*.

It's better that he's some strange thing we leave at church, and who doesn't have much to do with the rest of our lives, and the way we love people, *and the way we spread the gospel*.

Paul wrote that "*We are to have the same mind among ourselves which is ours in Christ Jesus who, though He's in the form of God, didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself becoming a slave.*" We are to have that same mind among ourselves. So just as Jesus became incarnate, Paul became *in Greek-ate, in Athens-ate*.

And I believe that you and I are called to become *in something-ate*.

Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 9:19, "*I have become all things for all men so that I might by all means save some.*"

We don't question he said it, but we're amazed that he did—that he could claim so much common ground with these pagans that he could talk like them in their language, use their images, quote their Joan Osbornes, and their philosophies, and speak in their manner of speaking.

He even called them brothers!
What's he doing? Betraying our club?

Of course! Just like Jesus betrayed the Pharisee's club.

If all we are is a club where you pay your dues, know the secret passwords, wear the special uniform, *we're missing Jesus*. We have our own evangelical pop, Christian culture. We hang out at certain places at certain times with certain people with certain ways of talking. We have Christian T-shirts, Christian music, Christian jewelry, Christian aerobic tapes, Christian schools, Christian "Praise the Lord" clocks, Christian "Jesus" bumper stickers, Christian "He's alive" frisbees!

We have a whole special vocabulary. We can say certain potty words and not other potty words. I could never figure out why we had to say which ones, or when, but my dad always told me, so it worked out.

But we don't smoke, drink, or chew—or go with girls that do!
Granted we gossip, we overeat and we hoard our money—but we do say grace before our meals.

We've developed a whole subculture, pop culture that's not necessarily prescribed by Scripture. We hang on to it and we wrap ourselves with it -- and that's not necessarily bad. Some of those things are really good at times, and helpful, *but when we get our subculture mixed up with our faith, it's idolatry. We end up worshiping our culture rather than our Christ.*

We confuse righteousness with slogans and Bible covers and bumper stickers.

Maybe Joan Osborne ends up rejecting not our Christ, but our culture—all our Jesus stuff and this unreal, inhuman Jesus that we often portray when we get occupied with playing church—*rather than being real church.*

And so, our session adopted this phrase, "*Real church for a real world.*"
Jesus became incarnate for us, Paul became Greek-ate for them to communicate Jesus.

And like Paul, we're called to become *in-something-ate*, and that something depends on whom you're trying to love. Husbands, do you want to bring the gospel to your wives and love your wives? Then you need to become in-wife-ate. You need to enter into her world.

What does she like?

What is it that she loves?

How can you speak the language of love to her?

Not by taking her fishing. What is it that means love to her?

And if you want to bring the gospel to your neighbor, you need to become *in-neighbor-ate*.

What are they into?

How can I love them?

Maybe you need to learn how to play bridge and then go play bridge with them.

You want to work with youth? You need to become *in-teenager-ate*.

Maybe you need to shave your head

and learn how to burp "*Mary Had a Little Lamb*"

and eat gold fish.

Whatever, you need to enter into their world with the gospel.

Most of the time we selfishly want people to come into our world, and learn our culture, and then we'll tell them about our gospel.

We're called to become incarnate—not just acting but entering. If you want to reach prostitutes, do you become a prostitute? Jesus certainly hung out with them, didn't he? But you don't become one. Paul said to those outside the law, "*I became as one*

outside the law and not being without law toward God, but under the law of Christ that I might win those outside the law."

I must become incarnate as far as the righteousness, the law of Christ allows. Like Jesus says, *"We are to be in the world but not of the world."* It's easy to be in the world and of the world, right? And it's easy to be not in the world and not of the world. It's harder to be in the world *and not of the world*. We're called to this radical identification with the world and yet a radical difference with the world.

If there's not a radical difference between you and the world, you don't have much of a message to give people in the world. And yet, if there's not a radical identification, you don't have much of a way to give it.

Jesus' incarnation was so radical because he so radically identified with us: Going to our parties, hanging out with tax collectors and prostitutes, and yet, he was so *radically different*.

Because of Bible covers and his clothes? No.
Because of a heart.
It changed the world.
And they'll know us by our what?
Our love, right?

The real difference is this: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control— against such there is no law."*

What is that? The fruit of the Spirit! The Spirit!
The person of Jesus alive in us wherever we go.
A radical difference but a radical identification.

Paul says to the Jew, *"I became like a Jew, to those outside the law, I became as one outside the law. I sacrificed my preferred culture to communicate my Christ."*

The incarnation is incredibly powerful because when Paul went into Athens, he was able to understand those Athenians and understand their hopes and their fears and that altar to the unknown God. But having understood it, he was able to be understood by them because he spoke their language.

He communicated using their ideas and their forms and their style and their images. People would say Paul is being unbiblical because he doesn't quote the Bible, but you see quoting the Bible doesn't make us any more biblical than quoting Chiltons' Auto Manual makes us a mechanic or a car. But when I *DO* what it says, I am biblical.

Paul said, *"I became all things for all men."* I used to wonder about the way Paul spoke their language and the way Jesus did the same thing—why he always talked about sheep, goats, farmers and seeds. Then one day, bingo, it hit me! He's talking to farmers!

But if Jesus were to show up here in Golden, Colorado, would he stand up and say, *"Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees"?* I think he'd say something like *"You know that church lady on Saturday Live? Don't act like her."*

If Paul wrote us a letter would he say, *"Be careful of the circumcision party"?* I would never go to a circumcision party anyway! That just makes me nervous! But he was talking to other people.

When I was a youth pastor, I needed to talk to youth about the gospel. I remember clearly driving up to the shopping center one day. Allen Newcomer was talking to these two girls who were in my Bible study. He says, "Oh Pete, I'm so glad you're here! Come over here and tell these gals, tell these gals that Jesus is a *stud!*"

And in my head, two images flashed through my mind. One was when my father got mad at me for saying stud in high school. Then he explained to me how a stud on the farm was used to reproduce horses. And I thought, "No, Jesus is not a stud."

But then I thought that, to Allen at San Ramón High School, stud meant someone who's cool, a really great guy. The popular guys were "studs." You wanted to get to know them and hang out with them.

I said, "Well yeah, Jesus is really a great guy." But the question is: "Is Jesus a *stud?*" In Nebraska 50 years ago, no way! In San Ramón High School in California, today—oh yes! *He is!*

To communicate love to my daughter Becky, who is four years old, I play the "Pretty, Pretty Princess" game with her. We spin the thing, and I wear little plastic earrings, a crown, and all that stuff. *She loves it.*

Daddy loves her and he's part of her world. To communicate with my one-year-old son, I throw him in the air and blow bubbles on his tummy, then I set him down. *He loves it.*

But if I want to communicate love to you and I blow bubbles on your tummy or I play the "Pretty, Pretty Princess" game with you, you would call the police. I would get arrested.

What I'm saying is, to love your next door neighbor, to communicate the gospel with them, you first need to say, "Why don't you come to the football game with me?" Then you hope that you can talk about things while you're there, rather than saying, "Why

don't you come to my house for fellowship and we'll get into the Word, brother?" They'll run away faster than you can imagine.

So you see, Paul spoke their language, in their style. He wasn't just communicating a *message*, he was communicating a *person*. And this is where incarnation is so powerful: if you want to communicate to a person, you have to encounter them. You have to meet them.

Paul went into Athens to live with them, to encounter them, so they could meet the Christ in this little Jewish man quoting their philosophers and speaking their language—the person of Jesus. Paul displayed Jesus, the medium displayed the message.

I read about a man converted in prison a little while ago. He went to the funeral of the man who led him to Christ and at the funeral he flung himself across the coffin weeping and crying out, "This was the only Jesus I ever knew." That's the incarnation, that's what we're called to. His church is his body. His spirit is communicated through us, incarnate in his body, the church, to the world.

In 1962, Don Richardson became a missionary along with his wife, Carol, and his son, Stephen, to the Sawee people of Netherlands, New Guinea. These people had never been contacted by a white man before, nor had they ever seen metal. They still lived in the Stone Age and still practiced cannibalism. When he moved into the jungle, three different tribes, fascinated with his white skin and modern technology, moved to surround their jungle home. I'm sure that made him nervous at the first.

Eventually he learned the Sawee language. He said the day came when he finally climbed up into their Sawee man-house. There, surrounded by human skulls, he began to share the story of Jesus with them. He told them about the Jews and about the exile, about the Lamb of God that was slain for the sins of the earth. They were just bored to tears. When he got to Judas, they got all excited because, in their culture, treachery like that was an honorable trait. Judaism was a set up for Jesus in Israel, but in the Netherlands, New Guinea it just didn't work.

Extremely frustrated, he decided to leave. He told them it was because he wasn't getting his message across, and also because fourteen civil wars had broken out around his house, now that these two tribes were so close together. When he told them he was going to leave, they came to him together and said, "If you don't leave, we promise we will make peace."

In his book, *Peace Child*, Richardson says he woke in the morning to see the most incredible, passionate ritual he'd ever seen in his life. There was a clearing in front of their jungle home. One tribe lined up on one side, and one tribe lined up on the other side. The air was tense and people were nervous.

All of a sudden, one man grabbed his little child from his wife, held the child up, and ran across the clearing, while his wife followed him crying and rolling in the mud. He was in agony too, crying. He grabbed his child and ran across the clearing and gave it to the other tribe. And he gave them his name. Then someone from the other tribe grabbed his child from his wife and ran across in the same way and gave it to the first tribe. As Richardson stood there, he understood what they were doing as they went through their ritual. They had an agreement that as long as the peace children lived, there would be peace. But when one died, all hell would break loose.

As he watched, bells started going off in his head. He realized this was it—the altar to the unknown god. This was the redemptive analogy—this was what God was doing in their culture. That night, he climbed up into the Sawee man-house, and he told them how God had given his Son as a Peace Child so we might have peace with God, and how He would never die, and our peace would last forever if only we received the Child.

He said people came to know Jesus that night. He then developed a whole theology around the idea of the peace child and their culture, while he lived the person of Jesus—the Peace Child in their midst and the Sawee came to know Jesus in droves.

He describes one Christmas day, when hundreds of Sawee people gathered together in one giant communal church—people, who only six years earlier had been cannibalizing each other, sat together singing songs. Then the Sawee preacher got up. In his own language, he quoted Scripture, which few people in all the world could understand as well as those cannibalistic New Guinea, Sawee people.

He read Isaiah 9:6, *“Unto us a child is born. Unto us a Son is given and the government will be on his shoulders and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”*

He said that was the best Christmas Day he ever experienced because it was *really Christmas*.

And wherever we go, we should be carrying Christmas with us. The Prince of Peace incarnate through us.

We’re His body.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You that You did not stay in heaven and glory but You were born into our world in the most sloppy, degrading fashion. You lived incarnate among us and in the end You were so incarnate You hung on one of our wooden crosses, dying in our place to save us from death. And Father, we thank You that Your Spirit is present within us, seeking to invade this world through Your body, the church. We give You the glory and we thank You in Jesus’ name.