

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, December 20, 2020

Fourth of four in an Advent Sermon Series entitled:

“Come, O Christ, the Light”

Luke 1:26-38

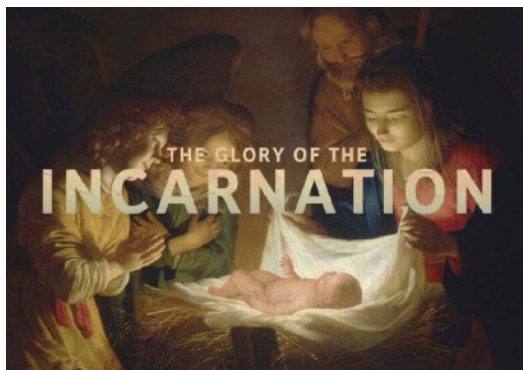
“Why Incarnation Matters”



This past August, I preached a sermon entitled “The *Protoevangelium* of James’: A Preface to Christmas”. And now, finally, it is almost Christmas! If you remember, in August the cool air made me giddy with the anticipation that winter was coming and soon snow would fall. And look! This week, we had a snow storm. As Hannibal was fond of saying in the TV series “A-Team”: “I love it when I plan comes together”.



In August’s sermon on the Gospel according to James and in today’s message on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we focus on what Protestants might call “The Birth of Jesus Foretold” and on what Catholics may call “The Annunciation of Our Lady”. The archangel Gabriel came to the blessed Virgin Mary and told her that “she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God, marking his incarnation”.¹ So, at our scripture’s heart is what is termed ‘the incarnation’.



For many the incarnation is abstract. It is a theological concept. In divinity school, I learned that the incarnation is “the belief that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, also known as God the Son or the *Logos*

¹ Wikipedia, “Annunciation”, at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation>, accessed December 19, 2020.

(*Koine* Greek for ‘Word’), ‘was made flesh’ by being conceived in the womb of a woman, the Virgin Mary, also known as the *Theotokos* (Greek for ‘God-bearer’). The doctrine of the incarnation, then, entails that Jesus is fully God and fully human”.² But all of that makes for what is a *really* lousy sermon!

So, without using all the theological mumbo-jumbo, I would like to share with you why the incarnation is NOT just a theological doctrine. More important than ‘what the incarnation is’, I want to share with you ‘why the incarnation matters’. Because ‘what it is’ doesn’t *really* matter. ‘Why the incarnation matters’ is what *truly* matters! I did not learn why the incarnation matters in divinity school. I only learned the meaning of the incarnation last week Saturday. I will share, with the permission of my instructor.



In my Pilates class this past Saturday, I was doing a particular stretch that strengthened my core and improved my posture. To do the stretch well, the instructor stood behind me and professionally placed her leg and side against my back and neck to ensure that I stretched at a perfect ninety-degree angle. When she touched me, I had a profound sense of security, assurance, and comfort. I felt guided, instructed, led, and reinforced. I felt, well, girded.

² Wikipedia, “Incarnation”, at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarnation_\(Christianity\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarnation_(Christianity)), accessed December 19, 2020.



Later that night, as I reflected on my experience I had an *epiphany* (which we will get to later in the first week of January); I had a spiritual awakening. I realized that night that the reason I had such a profound experience in my class was because it had been *since September* that I had touched anyone or that anyone had touched me. Three months, three months, and I had never felt the touch of anyone. I don't have a spouse. I don't have a partner. My children have left home. I can have no dog or cat in the Brooks House. I have been careful not to touch my parishioners during this year of COVID-19. I had been deprived of any touch by any 'flesh', whatsoever, for three months. I was and am suffering from that deprivation. For me, that professional touch became spiritual. I was connected to another. And that mattered. Immensely.

That Saturday night, I learned, I really learned, that it matters, it really matters that we touch.

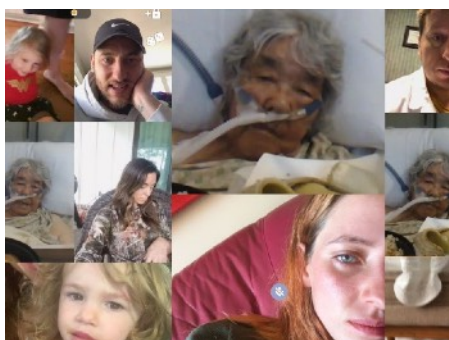


Yes, we can ZOOM. But is distant. Yes, we can stand six feet apart. But it is nonetheless isolating. Yes, we can talk on the phone. But that is just audible.

Yes, we can send cards and we can write emails and texts. But, all that is so one dimensional. It is quite simply, woefully inadequate. And I mean *woe-full-ly*.

But, to touch is a whole new level. It is like Checkers to Chess. It is multi-dimensional. And is that exactly what we need to connect to God: multi-dimensional connection! That is why the incarnation matters. Before the concept of God as human, God was distant, abstract, un-see-able, unapproachable, un-touchable, and therefore, yes, unknowable and unlovable. Without touch, relationship is next to impossible.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you have seen on the news the devastation caused by COVID-19.



What is perhaps the most insidious quality of this virus is the degree to which it prevents people from touching one another. I have seen families weeping though partition glass in hospitals.



I have seen people elevate themselves in cherry-pickers to the second and third floors of hospitals simply to glance and see loved ones in a desperate attempt to, ultimately, to touch them.



Our health care workers, thank God for them. Our health care workers have been the ones who have held people, touched them, on behalf of their spouses, their children, their grandchildren, even as they died. It tears my heart out every time I see these images. Tell me, tell me, what is worse than dying without the touch of a loved one?!

Friends in Christ, the incarnation matters. Christmas is not a 'holiday'. It is a profound spiritual declaration that it matters that God has come to us as human, 'Emmanuel', that means 'God with us'.

We Protestants may snicker that the Catholics' faith asserts that the bread becomes the flesh of Christ and that the wine becomes the blood of Christ.



But, really, how dare we judge or mock? Yes, Catholics believe that the bread and wine becomes the flesh and blood of Christ. Yet, is transubstantiation any more fantastic and unbelievable than our assertion that the Word became flesh in Jesus the Christ (as we shall learn on January 3rd)? And even if we do not believe in the *literal* incarnation of God (for many of us understandably do *not*), I put it to you that the concept of God in the flesh **itself** is as powerful and as meaningful as the literal belief of the concept. Just hold a child in your arms.

And that is just it. How can I claim this? Experience. Pure and simple. My experience! Touch matters. In the flesh matters. It mattered to me last Saturday in my Pilates class. And it matters to every person in the hospital sick with COVID-19 without the touch of their loved ones.

Friends, Christmas matters. *The concept* that God became flesh matters. Without touch, we are not straight. Without touch, our posture is askew. Without touch, we are insecure. Without touch, we have no solidarity. Without touch, we are alone.



Thanks be to God for Jesus the Christ, Immanuel, 'God with us'. You can never tell me it doesn't matter.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".