

*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom [God] appointed the heir of all things, through whom also [God] created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of [God's] nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. (1:1-3)*

It was God's genius of self-revealing to come in Jesus Christ with a depth of divine love that would go to any length to reach people, to grace them with whole-making power, and to open to them the life with eternal possibilities. It was God's strategy of salvation to enter human history in the human form of Jesus who embodied the *shalom* – the justice, peace, and righteousness of God's purpose – and who broke down the dividing walls of estrangement between persons and God, reconciling them to God, to each other, and to themselves. Not only in eternal laws and in the created universe did God reveal the divine purpose, but also with a near-presence in the familiar, living example of Jesus. God not only thundered the word from Mount Horeb but also pronounced the Word intimately in a human life with a flesh-and-blood identity.

God came in Jesus – and comes to us today – because God knew a familiar example is always the most effective definition and the best mode of communication. As Van A. Harvey said, "Human beings only seem to decide concerning the truth about life in general when they are confronted by a life in particular." No academic theory, no written word, no spoken warning is ever as convincing or illuminating as a person who embodies and lives out before our very eyes what we seek to know and become. That is why apprenticeship and "on-the-job training" are imperative. That is why the quality of family life and the integrity of parent-child relationships are so influential. We learn from the people we know and love and trust.

There is a terrific story I often use with the Confirmation class to describe why God came to us in the person of Jesus. I call it "The Parable of the Birds":

Once upon a time there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn't a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person. But he didn't believe all that stuff about an incarnation that churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did. He simply could not understand the claim that God became human. It didn't make any sense to him.

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service, but he stayed home. It began to snow. "If we must have Christmas," he thought, "it's nice to have a white one." He sat down by the fire to read the newspaper. A few minutes later he heard a thudding sound, followed by another and another. Birds, caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his window. Now they lay huddled miserably in the snow. "I can't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze," he thought. "But how can I help them?"

He thought of the barn. It was a warm shelter. He put on his coat and overshoes and tramped out through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light. But the birds didn't come in.

"Food will bring them in," he thought. So he sprinkled a trail of bread crumbs from the birds to the sheltering barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow.

He tried shooing them into the barn. They scattered in every direction – except the warm, lighted barn. "They find me strange and terrifying creature," he said to himself, "and I can't seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me. If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety."

Just at that moment, the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow. "Now I do understand," he whispered. "Now I see why you had to do it."

This story explains our understanding and response to God. God came to us, as one of us, so that we might know God better. In order for us to experience and understand God's nature and will on this deeper, more personal level, God gives us Jesus as a living revelation so that when we meet him and know him, we will behold God. As Jesus moves with caring love among us, we begin to realize that it is such a loving relationship that God wills and wants to occur within us and between us.

God also comes to us today through Jesus' living presence in other people whom we meet and with whom we share life-space. When we are loved by others, we better understand how God loves us. As 1 John teaches us: If you know love, then you know God (4:8). Yes, we sense God's presence as we share in relationships of love with wife or husband, son or

daughter, aunt or nephew; in the love of a friend or a colleague; in an encounter with a neighbor or a stranger. The impact, the influence, and the inspiration of pivotal persons in our lives reveal God to us as we meet the Christ who dwells in them.

Not only do we recognize and better understand God’s revelation when God wraps it up in another person, we also respond to the revelation more completely. The living presence of Christ appearing to the disciples motivated them to overcome their fears, move out into the pagan world, and turn it upside down. It was Paul’s passion and faith that moved Timothy to love and serve God. Nothing is more persuasive, more inspiring and motivating than the example of other persons who live out their faith in our midst, who act from courage in taking the risks of love.

Watching these persons cope, we no longer question whether it is possible for us to cope. Seeing them endure, we know it *is* possible for us to hang on five minutes longer or five weeks longer or five years longer. Watching them pour themselves out and stand firm against evil and adversity, we know there are wider limits to our perseverance and sacrifice. Entering with them into prayer and the silence of waiting upon God, we sense the source of strength that is theirs, the reason for their pervasive joy; and we ourselves yearn for what they have received.

That is why God entered human history in Jesus Christ in the miracle of Bethlehem and why Christ comes to us today. The gospel began in friendship – “one loving heart setting another on fire,” as Augustine put it. Christmas tells us how it happened 2,000 years ago and how it happens today as God makes the gospel real for us in the presence of the living Christ and in the lives and love of others who have been inspired by the power of Christ’s presence.

Prayer: O Living Christ, you were, you are, you come! Clothe us with garments of celebration that we may be prepared for the feast of your birth. Be born in us, we pray: that hope may sustain us; that vision may animate us; that love may reveal your presence within us. Sift from our lives all that distorts our nature and separates us from you and your love. Take what is righteous and good in us, and increase it as a blessing for others. Receive our prayers, and lead us on our journey of faith. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Source: Donald J. Shelby. *The Unsettling Season*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN. 1989. 29-39.

# Jesus Came – and Comes!

Sunday, December 7, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Malachi 3:1-2 and John 1:1-18;

Have you ever seen something at a distance, such as a cloud formation in the sky, a bird in a tree, or a landmark on the horizon and, having seen it, wanted to show it to others, to have them see it too? You tell them about it and they reply, “Show me! Show me!” You try. You describe where it is. You attempt to locate it for them using identifying markers. You even point to it. And if they still do not see it, you may even take their heads in your hands and adjust them to the right level or angle and point them in the right direction. Still they say, “Show me! Show me!”

The scriptures reveal that God had such a problem with the Hebrew people. The Bible narrates how God kept trying to show the people how to find the way to life, how to realize their destiny, how to participate in God’s purpose, and how to behold the beauty of God’s presence. All the while the people kept saying, “Show me! Show me!” God led them out of bondage, took them to the Promised Land, raised up leaders, and sent them prophets to speak the truth. Still the people could not see, or they refused to look.

Then God sounded the promise of a special messenger, the Messiah, who would come to them and whose name would be called *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6). This Messiah would be God’s revealer and redeemer and through him the people would finally see and understand, return and be saved. In the Messiah, God would inaugurate on earth a reign of peace, justice, and righteousness for all people.

“But in whom?” the people asked. God gave the answer in the Judean village of Bethlehem, even as the prophet Micah had foretold (5:27), and Jesus was born to the carpenter Joseph and his wife, Mary, from Nazareth in Galilee. In the human person of Jesus, God wrapped up what God willed and wanted the people to behold and to receive. So the writer of Hebrews declared: