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### Sermon Summary (3)

#### The Mystery of All Mysteries John 1:14-18

There are so many things in this world of ours that I don't understand that I often wonder if I understand anything at all. I don't understand how an ugly, slimy little caterpillar can become a beautiful, graceful butterfly. I don't understand how a rectangular box in my house can transform electrical impulses into a movie or sporting event of remarkable color and sound. I don't understand how typing on the keyboard of my laptop produces letters and words and images on the screen in front of me. I don't understand why all of us have an appendix. Do you understand where the end of the universe might be? Can you explain gravity? How does the human brain work? Why is there something rather than nothing? Since this is Mother's Day, I suppose I should ask: How does a baby not drown or suffocate in its mother's womb? And while we're at it, who really shot President John F. Kennedy?

Life is full of mysteries. They confound and confuse us. If you're like me, once you've reached the limits of understanding you just thank God for them and try to make use of them the best you can. But is there one mystery that surpasses them all? What is the single most amazing phenomenon in this vast universe in which we live?

If we were to pause and take a survey, my guess is that we'd get a lot of different answers, all of them viable candidates for the greatest mystery of all. Some of you would say: "Well, it's obvious: it's that statement in Genesis 1:1 where we are told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Isn't God's creative act of calling into existence this universe out of nothing the greatest mystery of all?" It may be. Or others of you may point to the fact that a young teen-aged girl named Mary who had never had sexual relations with a man somehow conceived and eventually gave birth to a young baby boy named Jesus. Or perhaps it is the remarkable truth that the death on a cross of this man named Jesus in some mysterious way atoned for our sins and reconciled us to God. Of course, some of you would point to the truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Well, that's enough. Let me come to my point. As far as I am concerned, the greatest mystery of all, the mystery of all mysteries, is John 1:14. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." I think the apostle Paul might agree with me. After all, he wrote in 1 Timothy 3:16, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh."

My aim this morning is singular. I want to do the best I can to help you understand what this means. If you leave today still scratching your head, bewildered and bumfuzzled, I haven't failed. In fact, that may be a sign that I've succeeded. Because the deeper your probe into this truth, the more you grasp its significance, the more overwhelmed and befuddled you will become.

#### *The Johannine Contrasts*

I think the best way to make sense of this statement in John 1:14 is by setting it in contrast to what we saw in our first week in John's gospel. So let's compare v.1 of John 1 with v. 14.

John 1:1

The Word *was*  
The Word was *with God*  
The Word *was God*

John 1:14

The Word *became*  
The Word dwelt *among us*  
The Word *became flesh*

When John first said that in the beginning was the Word (v. 1), he is describing the timeless and eternal nature of God. He was himself in the beginning but had no beginning. But then John says in v. 14 that this Word that eternally was,

in some sense *became*. The eternally pre-existent Word or Son of God in some sense started to be something that he once wasn't. He entered time and history.

Then notice that the Word, the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, was *with God*. The Word was never alone but dwelled in unimaginable intimacy and fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. But then John says in v. 14 that this Word who was with God in some sense dwelled *among us*. He never ceased to be with God but somehow, simultaneously, is also with us.

Finally, John said in v. 1 that the Word was *God*. The Word isn't an angel or an animal or any other species of being. The Word was and is God. But now in v. 14 this Word has become *flesh*. One can hardly imagine a seemingly more contradictory assertion than to say that this being who is God is also flesh.

As you know, what John is describing is what we call the doctrine of the Incarnation. Incarnation comes from two Latin words "in" and "caro" (flesh). We find this truth in other texts, such as Romans 8:3 where God the Father is said to have sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh." Peter says in 1 Peter 4:1 that "Christ suffered in the flesh." And John, writing in his first epistle, makes this incredible declaration:

"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2-3).

The truth of the Incarnation simply means that the Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God, became a human being without ever ceasing to be God. It wasn't the Father who became flesh. It wasn't the Holy Spirit who became flesh. It was the Word, the Son, who became flesh.

John doesn't say here that the Word became a man, although that is true. Nor does he say that he became a human, although that too is true. He doesn't even say that the Word took to himself a body or human nature, but that also is true. No, John says that the Word became "*flesh*"! The word translated "flesh" is a strong and almost crude way of referring to human nature in its totality. Jesus Christ had a real body, heart, soul, spirit, will, mind, and affections.

The Word didn't pretend to be a man. He didn't play act. He didn't put on a mask or disguise himself in a human costume. If you've read much of ancient Greek mythology you know that the gods and goddesses would often come down from the lofty heights of Mount Olympus and appear as humans so that they might engage in all sorts of adventures. But when situations got complicated or they found themselves in a bind, they would immediately throw it off and return to the abode of the gods. But that is not incarnation. That is merely playing of a game.

Jesus had a body (John 2:21) of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39; John 20:17, 20, 27) as susceptible to pain and pleasure as we are (Heb. 2:14). When he stubbed his toe or hit his finger with a hammer, he would have cried out in anguish! Matthew tells us that when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane his soul "was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He declared openly that he only wanted his will to be that of his Father (Luke 22:42). And it was into the Father's hands that he committed his "spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Jesus got hungry. If he were sitting next to you right now and had skipped breakfast, his stomach would growl (cf. Matt. 4:2). He got thirsty (John 19:28), grew weary (John 4:6), was moved to tears by the anguish of his friends (John 11:35), prayed with loud crying and tears (Heb. 5:7), and wept openly over the rebellion of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). He sighed (Mark 7:34), often in exasperation at the ignorance of his followers or the sin of others. According to Mark 10:14, his disciples would often annoy him!

His heart was filled with compassion (Matt. 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; Luke 7:13), love (John 11:3; 15:8-12; Mark 10:21), and joy (Luke 7:34; 10:21; John 17:13). He thought, reasoned, deduced, and inferred just like we do. The Word truly became flesh!

Think with me about this verb translated "became" in v. 14. John doesn't mean that the Word somehow "beamed down" in fully bodily form as if the Incarnation was just another episode of Star Trek. Don't ever compare the Incarnation to the legend of Superman, who was born on another planet to a man and a woman and then sent to earth with superhuman powers.

You will also notice that John doesn't say that the Word "entered into" flesh, as if to suggest that there was already this human being or body into which the Word made entrance. He doesn't say the Word "dwelled in" flesh. No, the Word BECAME flesh!

In the course of my life I became a husband, a father, and a pastor. But that isn't what John means. He is saying that the eternal Word entered into this world by being born as a human. Therefore, it isn't entirely accurate to say that Jesus has always existed or that Jesus was in the beginning with God the Father. No. The Son of God has always existed; the second person of the Trinity, the Word, was in the beginning with God the Father. But "Jesus" is the name given to the Word when he was conceived in the womb of Mary and was born. The Word was never called Jesus until Joseph, his adoptive father, gave him that name in obedience to the instruction of the angel.

So let me summarize.

**First**, the doctrine of the Incarnation means that two distinct natures are united in one person: Jesus. Jesus is not two people. He is one person, the God-man. There is no duality of personality. Jesus did not suffer from schizophrenia.

**Second**, when the Word became flesh he did not cease to be the Word. The Word or the Son of God voluntarily suspended the use of his divine powers and veiled his deity in human flesh so that he could live a genuinely human life. But God cannot cease to be God. When the Word became flesh, he did not do so by committing divine suicide!

**Third**, when the Word once became flesh at a point in time, he became flesh forever. The Word will always be the God-man. After his earthly life was over and he ascended to the Father in heaven, he didn't divest himself of his flesh or his human nature. He never ceased to be human. He is a man right now at the right hand of God the Father. But he is also God. He is now and forevermore the God-man.

If you're wondering why I am going to such great lengths to make the point of the reality of the Incarnation, it's simply because your eternal destiny hangs suspended on your belief in this truth. Do you remember what John said in 1 John 4?

"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2-3).

#### *What Did Jesus, the God-Man, Look Like?*

There has been considerable speculation all through the centuries about what Jesus looked like. I don't think it matters much, but I have to confess that the question this past week drove me to do a little research. If you want to see something truly disturbing, type into Google, *pictures of Jesus*. I kid you not, there were dozens and dozens of them, most of which were less than flattering and some of which were downright blasphemous. Here are seven of them just to give you an idea of what is out there.

Pictures of Jesus . . .

#### *Plumbing the Depths of the Incarnation*

The Word became flesh!  
God became human!  
Spirit somehow was given knuckles, elbows, and a spleen!  
The invisible became visible!  
The untouchable became touchable!  
The intangible became tangible!  
He who is eternal life experienced temporal death!  
The transcendent one descended and drew near!  
The unlimited became limited!  
The infinite became finite!  
The immutable became mutable!  
The omnipotent one became weak!

The unbreakable became fragile!  
Spirit became matter!  
Eternity entered time!  
The independent became dependent!  
He who upholds the universe by his power was nourished at the breast of a virgin!  
The almighty was scourged!  
The beloved became the hated!  
The exalted was humbled!  
Unimaginable glory was subjected to unspeakable shame!  
Fame turned into obscurity!  
From inexpressible joy to tears of unimaginable grief!  
From a throne to a cross!  
From ruler to being ruled!  
From power to weakness!  
The omnipresent God who fills the heavens became an embryo!

Stay with me for just a moment more. If it hasn't hit home yet, perhaps the following will do the trick.

*Conception:* God became a fertilized egg! An embryo. A fetus. God kicked Mary from within her womb!

*Birth:* God entered the world as a baby, amid the stench of manure and cobwebs and prickly hay in a stable. Mary cradled the Creator in her arms. "I never imagined God would look like *that*," she says to herself. Envision the newborn Jesus with a misshaped head, wrinkled skin, and a red face. Angels watched as Mary changed God's diapers! Tiny hands that would touch and heal the sick and yet be ripped by nails. What color were his eyes? Did he dream at night? Mary tickled his side which would one day be lanced with a spear.

*Infancy:* God learned to crawl, stand, and walk. He spilt his milk and fell and hit his head.

*Youth:* Was he uncoordinated? How well did he perform at sports? Did he know the pain of always being picked last when the kids chose up sides for a ball game? God learned his ABC's!

*Teenager:* Jesus probably had pimples and body odor and bad breath. The *God-man went through puberty!* His voice changed. He had to shave. Girls probably had a crush on him, and boys probably teased him. There were probably some foods he didn't like (no doubt squash among them).

*Carpenter:* Calloused hands. He dealt with customers who tried to cheat him or complained about his work. How did he react when they shortchanged him?

Some are bothered when I speak of Jesus like this. They think it irreverent or sacrilegious. They don't like to think that Jesus ever belched or blew his nose. But never forget: he was as fully human as he was fully God. The marvel of it all is that he did it for you and me! It was an expression of the depths of his love for you that the Word entered the depths of human ugliness, human weakness, and human humiliation.

There's more!

He was conceived by the union of divine grace and human disgrace.  
He who breathed the breath of life into the first man is now himself a man breathing his first breath.  
The King of Kings sleeping in a cow-pen.  
The Creator of oceans and seas and rivers afloat in the womb of his mother.  
God sucked his thumb.  
The Alpha and Omega learning his multiplication tables.  
He who was once surrounded by the glorious stereophonic praise of adoring angels now hears the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, and the stammering of bewildered shepherds  
He who spoke the universe into being now coos and cries.  
Omniscient, all-knowing, God counting his toes.

Mary playing "this little piggy went to market" on the toes of the God-mam (well, being Jewish, maybe it was "this little pony").

From the robes of eternal glory to the rags of swaddling clothes.

Infinite power learning to crawl.

Mary playing "patty-cake" with the Lord of Lords!

*The Word who became Flesh Dwelt Among Us!*

When John declares that the Word who became flesh "dwelt" among us he's not saying the same thing that I say when I tell you that I "dwell" on Kirkland Ridge in Edmond. Here in John 1:14 there is something in this word "dwelt" that is incredibly rich and spiritually thick and theologically profound. To help you understand the meaning of this statement, I need to take you back into the Old Testament.

The starting point for understanding this crucial concept is the Old Testament narrative in which we find the visible manifestation of the splendor of God among his people, the *shekinah* of God, his majestic and radiant glory without which the Israelites would have been left in the darkness that characterized the Gentile world. The question that plagued the hearts and minds of the Jewish people from the time of their emergence from the loins of Abraham was: ***where is God, how might we know him, are we allowed to see him, what must we do to hear his voice, are we allowed to draw near to him and if so, under what terms or conditions?***

After God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, he led them into the wilderness and gave instructions to Moses that he was to oversee the construction of a tent or mobile tabernacle. It was there, in that tabernacle, that God would come, dwell with, and meet his people. "Let them make me a sanctuary," the Lord spoke to Moses, "that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex. 25:8). When instructions were given for the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, we read in Exodus 25:21-22 – "And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I give you in commandment for the people of Israel."

Note closely: it was on the mercy seat, atop the Ark of the Covenant, where God would "meet" with his people and "speak" with them. It was there that "the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and [there that] the Lord would speak with Moses" (Ex. 33:9). It was there that "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34). The tabernacle was where the people of Israel would draw near to hear from God, to worship God, and to stand in his presence (cf. Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10).

What was true of the tabernacle during the days of Israel's sojourn was even more the case in the temple of Solomon. When the Ark of the Covenant was brought "to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim" (2 Chron. 5:7), "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God" (2 Chron. 5:14).

It is against this preparatory backdrop that we read the stunning declaration of John that "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). The word translated "dwelt" in your English Bible is not the normal word for "to live among" or "abide" in a particular location. The verb *skenoō* literally means "to pitch a tent" or "to live in a tabernacle" and unmistakably points back to the OT when God's glory took up residence in the tent of Moses, the portable tabernacle, and eventually in Solomon's temple.

John is not merely describing the coming of Christ. He is not simply saying that Jesus walked on the earth. His point is far more than the simple assertion that he was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. He wants us to understand that this is not simply a reference to Jesus living among other people, rubbing shoulders with them, or "dwelling" in a home or spending time on the streets. This "dwelling" among us is of far, far greater spiritual significance. John's point is that God has now chosen to dwell with his people in a yet more personal way, in the Word who became flesh: in Jesus! The Word, Jesus of Nazareth, is the true and ultimate embodiment of the *shekinah* glory of God, the complete and perfect manifestation of the presence of God among his people. The place of God's glorious dwelling is the flesh of his Son!

The glory which once shined in the tent/tabernacle/temple of old, veiled in the mysterious cloud, was simply a foreglow, a mere anticipatory flicker, if you will, of that exceedingly excelling glory now embodied in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ (cf. Col. 1:19).

Again, we must come to grips with the striking reality that God no longer lives in a tent or tabernacle built by human hands, nor will he ever. God's glorious manifest presence is not to be found in an ornate temple of marble, gold, and precious stones, but rather in Jesus. Jesus is the glory of God in human flesh, the one in whom God has finally and fully pitched his tent. The point is that the tabernacle of the Old Covenant, and later the temple constructed by Solomon, was a type or foreshadowing of the glory of Christ. That structure was not an end in itself, but a symbol or type or prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus Christ! It was the place of revelation and relationship, where God met and spoke to his people. But now we hear God and see God and meet God in Jesus.

For centuries of Israel's existence, the tabernacle and eventually the temple was the place of sacrifice, where forgiveness of sins was obtained. But today, under the New Covenant, we don't have to undertake a long journey to a specific geographical location or to a particular building or church sanctuary in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins. For that, we now go to Jesus, regardless of where we may live, regardless of the country of our residence. Israel worshipped and celebrated in the temple in Jerusalem. We now worship in spirit and truth, regardless of geographical locale (cf. John 4:20-26).

To meet God, to talk with God, to worship God, you no longer come to a building or a tent or a structure made with human hands. You come to Jesus! Jesus is the Temple of God! The Church, too, is the True Temple of God But the story doesn't end there. We, the church, are the body of Christ and therefore constitute the temple in which God is pleased to dwell. The shekinah glory of Yahweh now abides permanently and powerfully in us through the Holy Spirit. When Paul describes this in his letter to the Ephesians, he refers to Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, "in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21-22).

When Paul appeals to the Corinthians to live in holiness and unity and peace one with another he grounds his appeal in this truth: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16-17). In his plea for sexual purity, he again asks: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20; see 1 Peter 2:4-10). All this bring us to Paul's consummate declaration in 2 Corinthians 6:16b: "For we are the temple of the living God"!

Once again, you need to keep in the forefront of your thinking that in the first century, when Jesus arrived on the scene, the Temple was the center of all religious and spiritual life and activity. It was the place that gave Israel its identity. But more than this, it was the place of sacrifice, where forgiveness of sins was obtained. To understand this we need to look briefly at one of the more famous incidents in the life of Jesus. It's found in Mark 2:1-12.

There we read about a paralyzed man whose four friends carry him to Jesus. Unable to make their way through the crowd, they tear a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching. They lower their friend to the ground, much to the dismay of everyone present. It is here that we pick up the narrative: And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:5-12)

We must remember that for the Jewish people, the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of religious and spiritual life. It was in the Temple that God drew near to his people. If you wanted to experience the nearness of God, if you wanted

to stand in proximity to the revelation of his glorious presence, you had to take a literal trip. No matter where you lived, you had to journey to Jerusalem.

It was at the temple that the people of God worshiped. But most important of all, it was only in the Temple where the sacrifice for sin was made and thus the place where forgiveness was found. But here is Jesus, saying to this paralyzed man, and to everyone else as well, ***I am the fulfillment of the Temple. I am here to be and to do everything the Temple was and did.*** Jesus extended forgiveness of sins without sending the man to the Temple, without requiring that he perform the necessary worship or offer the blood sacrifices that were so much a part of Jewish life. "I am the Temple," Jesus is saying. "Everything you formerly experienced there, everything you found there: whether the forgiveness of sins or the presence of God or the revelation of his glory, you now and forever after find in me!"

Simply put, this little story about men digging through a roof to get their friend to Jesus is simply a platform on which a much greater and far more significant story is being played out. This is Jesus turning the religious system on its head. This is Jesus undercutting the old and replacing it with the new. This is Jesus saying: "It's all about me. I am the Temple. I am the presence of God. I am the place of his glory. I am the source of forgiveness." If you want forgiveness and freedom from guilt and its condemning power, you don't go to a specific place, whether that be a shrine or a building or a particular church. Neither do you go to a mere human being, be that me, your pastor, or a priest or a bishop or someone who is ordained into gospel ministry. You simply go to Jesus.

#### *Conclusion*

That, to put it as simply and as gloriously as is humanly possible, is what John is saying to us in v. 14 of chapter one of his Gospel. That is what John means when he says the Word became flesh "and dwelt among us." The glorious and majestic presence of God's glory resides permanently and bodily in the person of Jesus Christ. God has come to earth in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, and has set up his tabernacle, his dwelling place in the flesh of Jesus. Jesus is the tabernacle of God's glorious presence, the person in whom and where we find forgiveness, the person through whom we hear God speak, the person where we meet God in all his fullness and splendor. Jesus is the true Temple of God, the dwelling place of infinite divine glory. Come and worship!