

The Divine Descent
Part Three: Jesus our Sibling
Philippians 2.5-8a

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Our front doors carry huge symbolic meaning for us as human beings.

Think about this. For every one of us, the human experience is profoundly challenging.

And for many of us, a huge part of that challenge is that we find ourselves feeling isolated and lonely. At some level, married or single, surrounded by family and friends or alone, all of us experience a sense of being missed by others. Of not being known, not being understood. Of not being pursued, not being loved. Maybe a sense of not being *worth* pursuing, or worth loving.

And our front doors have so much symbolic meaning when so much a part of our human experience is feeling alone. Think what a knock on the door means.

When's the last time someone knocked on your door?

These days, most of us run and hide when someone rings the doorbell or knocks on the front door. Who is trying to sell me something now? So we use our Ring security devices to weed out the people who are on our doorstep trying to get something from us. And that doesn't leave a whole lot of people for whom we answer the door.

But at a deeper level, think of what our front doors can mean. A ring of the bell, a knock on the door. Our hearts jump. Who could it be? Or: Finally! They're here! And we jump up and run to the door, ready to welcome a friend into our aloneness, someone whose presence at some level speaks to our deep desire to be known and loved and pursued.

It's so funny – just as I was writing this section of my sermon my doorbell rang. And my heart jumped and I ran down the stairs and no one was there, and there on the front porch was a delivery of some things we had bought. Bit of a let down.

For many of us, Christmas is just that crazy season of busyness and obligation that rolls around once a year, that even in its fullness tends to remind us of our aloneness.

That's what Christmas has become. But that's not what Christmas is. Just the opposite.

Here's what's true. Christmas is about the God of the Universe coming to our front door.

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Today we come in our Advent sermon series to what is typically the focus of the entire month of December – celebrating that moment in time – in the days of Caesar Augustus – when Jesus took on flesh, became a human being, and stepped into our midst.

Passing Through the Door Between Heaven and Earth



Christmas is the day when God the Son stepped out of heaven, through the door between heaven and earth, and into our human experience.

For the past two Sundays we've focused on what came before this moment: first, the Son of God enjoying eternal fellowship with God the Father and God the Spirit.

Then, the moment of decision to step down from his rightful position of glory and honor and, motivated by love, and expressing his greatness by giving rather than just by receiving, he turns, sets his eyes on us, takes up the towel of a servant, and steps towards humanity.

And here, in the manger, on Christmas day, is the startling result of that self-giving decision. The incarnation, which literally means: to em-body, to put into flesh.

Paul captures this divine descent, this downward arc, in the second chapter of his letter to the Philippian church, where he writes:

Philippians 2.5-8

In your relationships with one another,
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man . . .

Today we explore those last two phrases, those parallel expressions we find at the end of verse seven and the beginning of verse eight.

What I'd like to do this morning is first to just walk back through those phrases and notice a few things with you. But then I want to step back and think with you about what all of this means for us.

Philippians 2.7-8

being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man . . .

First, three things to notice about the text

1. The first thing I want you to see is something you actually can't see.

In the Greek there is a jarring contrast that we don't see in our English translation. In verse 6 it says "being" and in verse seven it says "becoming." *Already being* in very nature God, and then at a moment in time *becoming* a human being.

God is who he has always been and will always be. And a human being is who, at a specific juncture in place and time, he becomes.

2. The second thing to be aware of is the feel of these phrases in our English translations is a bit misleading. The phrase "being made in human likeness" sounds like something Plato or Aristotle or Paul Gould would say – it sounds so philosophical and abstract. But in everyday Greek this just means "being born just like any other human being." It's the opposite of vague. One day, right here, God became flesh.

The same is true of that second phrase "being found in appearance as a man." It sounds like it's making some sort of vague claim about body and spirit dualism, but it's not. It means if you were walking down the street and you saw him, it would be obvious to you that he was an actual human being. It means just the opposite of what it sounds like. He didn't just *appear* to be human; he was. He fully entered into the human experience. He was a human being. That was his actual identity, not just how he appeared.

He was born just like any other human being. And he looked and acted just like any other human being.

3. Having said that, here's the third thing I want to point out.

Even though these are straightforward ways of saying the Son of God became a human being, neither of these is the typical way you might express it. Both of these phrases – being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man – both of these

phrases have an ambiguity about them that can make us uncomfortable, and that ambiguity is captured pretty well in our translation.

It almost sounds like Paul is saying he only had the *appearance* of being human, not that he actually was a human being. That's what he seemed like, but that's not what he actually was.

And it's interesting – even during the first century, before the New Testament was finished being written, a view began to emerge that claimed that Jesus only seemed to be a human being, but he never actually became one.

That view is called Docetism, which means, “he seemed,” and John addresses directly it in chapter four of his first letter. How do you know if someone's teaching is false? John writes:

This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person... acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, in the flesh, that person has the Spirit of God. But if someone . . . does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. (1 John 4.2-3)

So the New Testament calls this idea that Jesus only appeared to be human as false teaching.

But still this ambiguity remains in the language.

Here's what I think is helpful for us to realize. In Daniel 7.13-14, a vision is recorded that was profound significant for the Jewish people in the centuries that followed as they tried to make sense of who this Messiah would be. It says:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was someone who looked like a human being, or, who had the appearance of a human being, coming on the clouds in the sky. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him.

One day, according to the Old Testament prophesy, there will come someone who is both human and divine. He will have the authority of God, but he will have the appearance of a human being. Paul is echoing that language here. He is saying, this Jesus, this is the One. This is the one who fulfills that prophesy.

So the ambiguity in the language isn't Paul saying Jesus was *less* than a human being. It is Paul saying Jesus was *more* than a human being. He was a person, but he was also more than a person.

Writing in the 300s, when the church was still trying to gain crystal clarity on the doctrine of the trinity, Hilary of Poitiers wrote: “He did not lose what He *was*, but began to be

what He *was not*. He did not cease to possess His *own* nature, but received what was *ours*.”

So Paul says: into our midst was born one who in every way was a human being, just like us. And yet, he was also something more. Something much much more.

Significance of the incarnation

So, with that as background, what I'd like to do now is reflect with you on why this is all so important. What makes the incarnation meaningful? Why does it matter that God the Son became a human being?

As I was wrestling with how to convey the significance of God becoming flesh, of God's divine descent into human form, I thought of an example I thought might be meaningful.

Two years ago, in January of 2023, Mung Chiang became the President of Purdue University. From his office in Hovde Hall, surrounded by a team of assistants and secretaries and deans and administrators, he took on the overwhelming task of leadership of the school, serving 50,000 students, leading 15,000 employees, managing 2500 acres with 160 buildings, and shepherding a community with a three billion dollar annual operating budget.

But in a step that has become an annual tradition for him, when Boiler Gold Rush came around in August, he stepped out of his paneled and polished offices, headed out on campus, and spent the day alongside other volunteers helping students move into their dorm rooms.

President Chiang, Boiler Gold Rush 2023



What happens when the President of Purdue comes and walks among his students? Well, you can sense it in this picture, what it means. And I think reflecting on it for a minute can help us grow in our appreciation of what the incarnation means.

First, when he stepped out of Hovde Hall and in among the students, there is a sense of Dr Chiang lowering himself from his position of importance and stepping towards those he serves. He draws near, and that sends an important message of value to the students, that he wants to come to them, that he is taking the initiative to be with them.

Related to that, there's also a sense of him raising up those he encounters. You know this. When someone with a lot of power and importance steps into your world, it elevates you. It makes you feel important, it makes you feel seen, it adds to your sense of the value of who you are and what you do.

Also, when Dr Chiang walks among his students it gives them a chance to get to know him. They begin to find out what his interests are, learn what his voice sounds like, and discover what makes his heart beat.

The other significant thing is that it communicates that he identifies with them. There he is, wearing his black and old gold just like all the rest of them. In an interview when he became president, Dr Chiang said, "I am proud to be a Boilermaker today." He never attended Purdue himself, but his walking among them and dressing like them communicates that he is one of them. By walking the paths they walk, and climbing the stairs they climb, and carrying the burdens that they carry, and entering the rooms they live in, he shows that he is entering into their experience.

All those things are true of the incarnation as well, only more so, much more so, because the divide between heaven and earth is so much more vast than the distance from Hovde Hall to Cary Quad.

So let's walk back through each of those, thinking this time of what it means for the God of the universe to put on human flesh and come and walk among us as a fellow human being.

Rembrandt, The Visitation of the Shepherds



What happens when the God of the Universe comes and walks among the men and women he created?

First, the incarnation is significant as an act of *condescension*.

Not condescension in the way we understand that word now, a snarky sort of a better-than-you attitude of scorn for those who are beneath us, but in its original sense:

descend, meaning to step down, to lower yourself, and *con*, meaning to be with, to step towards and share in.

There is a vast gulf between God and humanity and God doesn't make us climb up to him. He takes the initiative to close the gap. He lays aside the trappings of his power and privilege. He rises from the throne and steps down toward his creation. He seeks us out. He draws near to us. He comes to us.

Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you!

He moves into our neighborhood. He comes and knocks on our door.

John 1.1 and 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Second, the incarnation is significant as an act of *elevation*.

By becoming a human being, God dignifies humanity. By coming down to us, he lifts us up to him. He adds nobility to what it means to be a human being. When he created us, he said, "It is very good." But when he became one of us, he proved that he meant it.

Hebrews 2.11 (JBP)

The one who makes men holy and the ones who are made holy share a common humanity. So that he is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.

When the Son of God became a human being, when he took on flesh and blood, he became a brother to us, he elevated what it means to be a human being.

Third, the incarnation is significant as an act of *revelation*.

When God came to us, he revealed himself to us. He made himself known to us. We were able to see his face, hear his voice, be touched by his hands, follow in his footsteps, and come to know his heart.

When we see Jesus, we see God. Jesus is the visible God revealing the invisible Father.

John 1.18

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Jesus is God making himself known.

In their book *We Would See Jesus*, Roy and Revel Hession, write:

The fact is, God is unknowable unless He grants us a revelation of Himself. . . . However, the glorious central fact of Christianity is that God has made a full and final revelation of himself which has made him understandable, accessible and desirable.

As it says in II Corinthians 4.6, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."

Light is invisible unless it shines upon some object. . . . The object upon which he has shone is the face of Jesus Christ. . . . We need look no further than the face of Jesus to see God. (27-29, 33)

And then finally, the incarnation is significant as an act of *identification*.

By becoming one of us, he doesn't just draw near, he enters in. He enters into the human experience. Human life is not just something he has created, now it is something he has experienced. As the TV ad campaign says, "He gets us." He knows.

As Hans Bouma says, "His humanity is our humanity."

This is what Job longs for as, in his suffering, he looks ahead to the coming of the promised King. Job 19.25 says:

But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
and he will stand upon the earth at last.

The Hebrew word "earth" is filled with significance. It can be translated "dust," the stuff of which we're made, expressing our frailty, our mortality, as flesh and blood, "ashes," a symbol of the loss and grief we experience as human beings, or "mud," which speaks of the struggle, the mess, the humiliation, that human life can mean.

When the Messiah comes, he will fully immerse himself in the human experience with us. He will stand in the dust, the ashes, the mud, with us.

Just as in fact he did, according to Hebrews chapter 2:

Hebrews 2.17-18

For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

As Oswald Chambers writes,

No human being knows human beings as God does.
(*My Utmost for His Highest*, October 4)

Last summer I shared with you a wonderful passage from Walter Wangerin's book, *The Book of the Dun Cow*. The book is sort of a cross between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down* in which the Christ-figure is represented by a tan or dun-colored cow.

The passage captures as powerfully as anything I've read this idea of God identifying with us in our human experience.

Chanticleer the Rooster has lost all of his sons in a battle against the evil dragon Wurm. Sobbing, utterly devastated and broken, he collapses on the ground in tears and grief, crying out to God, "Oh God, where are you? Why have you hidden your face from us?"

And then it was that the Dun Cow came to him. She put her soft nose against him, to nudge him into a more peaceful position. Gently she arranged his head so that he might clearly see her.

. . . Her eyes were liquid with compassion – deep, deep, as the earth is deep. Her brow knew his suffering and knew, besides that, worlds more. But the goodness was that, though this wide brow knew so much, yet it bent over his pain alone and creased with it.

Chanticleer watched his own desolation appear in the brown eyes of the Cow, then sink so deeply into them that she shuddered. Her eyes pooled as she looked at him. The tears rose and spilled over. And then she was weeping even as he had wept a few minutes ago – except without the anger. Strangely, Chanticleer felt an urge to comfort her, but . . . the initiative was not in him.

A simple creature only, he watched – felt – the miracle take place. Nothing changed. The clouds would not be removed, nor his sons returned. . . . But there was this. His grief had become her grief, his sorrow her own. And though he grieved not one bit less for that, yet his heart made room for her, for her will and wisdom, and he bore the sorrow better. (125-126)

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That's what it means for us that God the Son stepped down from his throne and came to earth and took on human form. He came down to us. He lifted us up to him. He makes himself known. And he comes to know us.

But what does it mean for you?

We have dear friends who have been alienated from their adult son for years. He has shut off all communication with them, and closed off any way that they could be in touch with him. He has made it clear in no uncertain terms that he wants nothing to do with them.

As you can imagine, it has been a source of incredible pain for them both. They have felt compassion, and hurt, and anger, and sadness, and disappointment, and resignation. But amid all that, the thing they never stopped feeling was love for their son.

So this week, after years of prayer, and longing, and hope, and wrestling, and praying, after years in which they never stopped loving their son, my friend hopped on a plane on the east coast and flew three thousand miles all the way to the west coast, and rented a car, and drove to his last known address, and knocked on the door.

And when the door was opened, he looked into his son's eyes, and he said, "I came all this way just to tell you that I love you." His son hugged him, and said, "I love you too."

Christmas is God hopping on a plane, and coming and knocking on our front door.

Gazing at Lucy



When he came to us as in human form, God came to give us the opportunity to see him and to hold him, and to gaze into his eyes, while he says to us, "I came all this way just to tell you I love you."

As we'll see next Sunday, he descends even further to convey his love for us.

Christmas is about God coming to us to tell us he loves us.

And to give us the opportunity to say to him, "I love you too."