

The Divine Descent, Part Two
Philippians 2.5-7: Jesus our Servant

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It's a pretty amazing thing to gaze at a newborn child – so tiny and beautiful and complete and miraculous.

This is little Lucy Cain, our newest grandchild, just a few days after she was born.

Just that moment in itself, of looking at a baby, can be so moving and breathtaking. Time just has a way of coming to stop.

But when we are looking at a newborn, our wonder and our awe only grow when we think about all that came before this moment and all that will follow it

When we look back and think about this child's parents and how they were each children at one point, and then grew to be adults, and how they met and were brought together, and all the circumstances and miracles that led to this child being formed from two cells and then being born at this moment.

And then to turn and look into the future and think about what his or her life will hold in the years to come. Learning to smile, and sit up, and crawl, and walk, and talk, and then run and ride a bicycle. Childhood, then the teen years, then adulthood, and then maybe their own children.

This is a *life* here before me, not just a child, not just a moment. When we look at a newborn that way, with all of its past and all of its future in view, that little child before us grows in complexity and beauty and mystery.

I think there's a similar dynamic that God intends would happen as we look at Jesus in the manger at Christmas time.

Sure, we can get caught up in the drama of the moment of the birth, and with good reason. Mary and Joseph leaning in with weary joy and fondness, the shepherds looking on in hushed wonder, the skies so recently filled with a multitude of angels, the star beckoning overhead, the wise men making ready. And there, in the middle of it all, is this baby in the manger. Freeze frame.

I don't know about you, but sometimes that little plastic Jesus in the plastic manger can come to feel pretty static. Every December out of the attic it comes, and every January we put the baby back in the box and out it comes again the next year. Just like last year. Always the same age. Never moving or changing or growing. Still in the manger.

But what happens when, looking at that child in the manger, we begin to take in the wider view, and consider where this child has come from, and what lies ahead for this child?

Not just coming from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and going on from Bethlehem to Egypt. But coming from the halls of heaven, conceived into human existence by the Holy Spirit, planted in willing Mary's womb, and given as a gift to humanity?

And not just heading to Egypt, but heading on from there to a life of ministry, and then on to the cross and the tomb, and bursting again out of that tomb, and heading back to heaven again, with all of time hurtling toward the end of the age and his triumphal and eternal rule?

What might it mean for us to remember all that had happened before he climbed into this manger, and all that will happen once he climbs back out of it?

What might it mean if, when we look at this child in the manger, we see not just a human child but a life that is eternal, a divine life, a life that has always existed and always will?

That's the intent behind our Christmas series this year. We want to take in the wider view and see where this child has really come from, and where this child is really going, so that we can understand better what the presence of this little child really means for us today.

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In order to better understand who this child was, and is, and will be, we're mining the riches of a wonderful hymn found in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Last Sunday Rob introduced us to it and walked us into the first phrase:

Philippians 2.5

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Philippians 2.6

who, being in very nature God . . .

King Jesus was and is and always will be God.

The phrase “being in very nature God” means “existing, as he already did, in the very nature of God.” This is his preexisting, always existing, nature. Before there was anything else there was and always has been God, one God existing eternally in three equal persons – Father, Son, and Spirit. Separate persons, but not separate gods, three existing eternally as one, one existing eternally as three.

So what led to the Second person of the Trinity becoming a little child and ending up in a manger? What commenced that divine descent? Where did it begin? What was the choice that was made that led to all this?

That’s what we’ll be exploring today, as we look at the second half of verse 6 and the first part of verse 7 of Philippians chapter 2.

Paul goes on to say that Christ Jesus . . .

Philippians 2.6-7

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.

There’s so much here. Let’s walk back through these phrases.

The passage begins with who Jesus is. In very nature God.

That means he is clothed in divine glory and majesty.

That means he rightly occupies a position of glorious rule and power.

That means he rightly receives the worship and service of all creation.

Jesus is God. That’s who he was, and is, and always will be.

But in the next phrase, we’re brought into his way of seeing, his outlook as the one occupying the throne. And we learn that his position in the universe doesn’t determine his perspective. His privileges don’t rob him of his prerogative to express his divine freedom in whatever way he wishes. Jesus . . .

Philippians 2.6

being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

Paul says Jesus' understanding of his divine greatness excluded any notion that he existed merely to be perpetually worshiped and served.

God desires our worship because it is right, not because he lusts for it or needs it to complete some incomplete part of himself, which is what motivates us when we want someone to worship or admire us.

Paul says Jesus didn't consider his being God "something to be used to his own advantage."

The Greek word behind this phrase means to seize, to snatch, to grab onto, to lay hold of. So it could mean two things in this context: grabbing hold of something you don't have but want, or holding onto something you already have and want to keep.

In this passage it has to have the second meaning, because we were just told that Jesus is already fully God, that he already has a divine nature and will always be equal to God in every way.

So being in very nature God isn't something that he wants to have but doesn't have. It's something that he already has. And this passage, astonishingly, says that though he has it, he doesn't feel a need to cling to it.

He doesn't see the rights and powers and privileges and freedoms that he has as God as something he has to have, as something he has to cling to, in order to serve himself – he doesn't see his divinity as something to be used for his own benefit (NCV), or something to be exploited (CSB), or something to be used to his own advantage (NIV), as some of the different translations put it.

I think this introduces a fascinating dimension into our understanding of what it means for God to be jealous for our worship, as you may remember it says in II Corinthians 11.2.

The Scriptures are clear that, as our holy and loving creator, who is perfect in every aspect of who he is, God is worthy of our worship and service, and he rightly invites and expects it. But God invites our worship not because he needs it. He is deserving of it but we are the ones who need it. God our creator created us to find our rest, our peace, our fulfillment, in him alone, and if we worship anything else we will always be discontent and disappointed and disillusioned.

God does not merely think about himself, and want he can receive from us. He thinks about us, the beings that he did not need to create but chose to create in love. As one

commentator said, “The true nature of God is characterized not by selfish grabbing but by open-handed giving.”

Which means God the Son, the second person in the Trinity, is as free to lay aside his glory as he is to receive glory.

Which prepares the way for the choice that leads to the incarnation, to the Second Person of the Trinity becoming that tiny needy baby in a cave in Bethlehem. And that takes us to the next part of the passage.

Christ Jesus . . .

Philippians 2.6

being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

Philippians 2.7

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.

First that phrase, “He made himself nothing.”

Literally the Greek says, “He emptied himself.” The Greek word is *kenosis*. What exactly that word means has been the subject of debate for centuries.

One approach was to take this word literally. A school of thought that became especially popular coming out of the Enlightenment, when there was so much emphasis being placed on the humanity of Jesus, they believed that when Jesus became a human being he actually divested himself of aspects of his own divine nature and power.

He emptied his pockets of his divine capacities, and instead of being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, his knowledge was limited to normal human knowledge, his power was limited to what a typical human being could do, and he could only be present where his physical body was.

But that fails to satisfy the evidence in the gospels. As I’m sure you remember from our study of Mark’s Gospel this spring, we saw situation after situation that moved the crowds to awe and wonder and fear, in which Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, quiets storms, multiplies bread, produces wine, controls demons, reads minds, and predicts the future – all things that are well beyond the power of any normal human being.

So clearly Jesus expresses his divine nature while he is a human being. But Jesus never gives full expression to his divine nature while he is here among us. Often his divine glory remains hidden and his divine power remains unaccessed.

When He is tempted by Satan, he affirms that he could call upon the Father in a moment to turn the stones to bread or rescue him from the top of the temple, but he won't (Matthew 4.1–11). And when he is betrayed by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane, he assures his disciples that he has legions of angels at His disposal, but he refuses to call on them (Matthew 26.53).

Yet despite his self-imposed limits, Jesus never ceases to possess his full divine nature, as the story of the transfiguration makes clear. You remember we're told that Jesus pulled aside Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain, and then he pulled back the veil.

Matthew 17.2

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

As the Chalcedonian creed says, Jesus was fully God and fully man, always remaining completely divine even while he became a human being for a season.

So a second way of interpreting this word, and I think a more faithful way to understand what it means for Jesus to empty himself, is captured in what New Testament scholar Mike Riccardi calls *krypsis*, which is the Greek word for veiling.

He argues that the word *kenosis* doesn't mean "to pour out," as if Jesus were emptying himself of his divine attributes. He doesn't un-become God. He just veils aspects of his divinity. Everywhere the word appears in Scripture, *kenosis* means "to nullify" or "to make of no effect." Not to make his divine nature nothing, but to make it *as though* it were nothing.

The text teaches not that Christ emptied Himself of some attribute or quality, but that He emptied Himself of self. He chose not to make much of himself. He nullified Himself; He made Himself of no importance, stepping off the throne, veiling his divine glory, and stepping into human history.

And not only was he not thinking of himself. He was thinking of us. He made a choice to lay aside the enjoyment of his divine glory and privileges in order to embark on a mission of love.

That leads to the second half of this verse.

"He took on the very nature of a servant."

I was recently reading a book about how to understand art and came across two paintings that I thought captured this decision perfectly. They couldn't be more different in feel.

The first portrait is of Queen Elizabeth 1.



Armada Portrait of Elizabeth I by George Gower 1590

It was painted to celebrate the overwhelming victory of her English navy over the Spanish armada. Everything about this painting is a tribute to Elizabeth's glory. Sitting in the exact center of the painting and filling the entirety of the canvas with her royal finery, she sits on a huge throne in a position of unrivaled authority, surrounded by symbols of power and wealth.

Beside her sits the crown given to her by Francis Drake, covered with gold and precious stones, which he plundered from the Spanish. Next to her are precious tapestries and gold statues. She is covered with pearls, symbols of her control over the world's seas. And her hand rests on a globe, an unequivocal statement that she rules the world and claims it all as her own.

The second painting captures another Elizabeth, also royalty. But this portrait couldn't be more different.



St Elizabeth Tending the Sick by Adam Eiseimer 1597

Princess Elizabeth was the daughter of King Andreas II of Hungary.

But when she turned 20 she renounced all her privileges as royalty, left her palace, and moved to small village in Germany where she used her wealth to start a small hospital. She spent the rest of her life caring personally for those who came to her hospital in need, whether that meant treating someone who was sick or feeding someone who was hungry or providing a bed for someone who had no place to stay.

You have to look closely to find her in this painting. She's down at the bottom, leaning over the bed of a patient in a posture of service, the thinnest of haloes over her head. Her royal crest is on display, but it takes a sharp eye to find it, and there are far more images on the walls that point to Christ than point to her.

The first portrait captures the sort of glory that rightly belongs to a king or queen. The second portrait captures the opposite – the inglorious role of a servant.

Jesus took up the exact opposite position from the one he was entitled to, the one he was worthy of, the one he fully deserved. He laid all that aside. The Master exercised his mastery by becoming a servant.

A servant to whom?

This is fascinating. Scripture teaches that Jesus, laying aside his glory, becomes a servant both to God the father and to the human beings that he created together with his Father.

Let's take just a moment to explore those.

First, Jesus, fully equal with the Father, becomes a servant of the Father. Laying down his right to rule, relinquishing his will, he resolves to say and do only what the Father tells him to say and do.

Look at some of the passages in John's gospel that describe his total surrender to the will of the Father.

John 5:30: I can do nothing on my own. I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

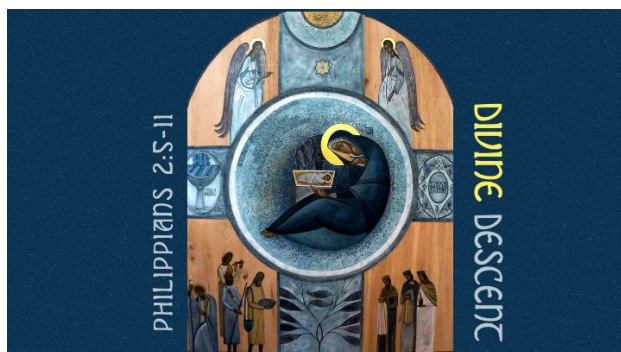
John 6:38-46: I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

John 12:49: I haven't spoken on my own authority. The Father who sent me gave me his own command about what I should say and speak.

He surrenders his divine rights and freedoms, empties himself of self, and makes himself nothing, joyfully aligning his will to conform in every way with the will of the Father.

His first step in becoming a servant is to surrender his will to his father. And every step from that point on is a step downward, into deeper and deeper postures of service.

I love this painting that we're using for this Divine Descent series.



It's an icon painted by Ukrainian artist Anna Sokolan.

I love how powerfully it captures the deep descent into self-relinquishment and service that lies at the heart of the incarnation. Often in an icon Jesus is large and in the center, whether he is shown as a newborn child, or as the savior on the cross, or as the Ruler of All seated on the throne. Here Jesus is miniscule, and is found at what looks like the bottom of a deep, deep well.

As it says in II Corinthians 8.9:

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

Think about the start of chapter 13 in John's gospel, when Jesus stands up from the table, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes the feet of the rest of the disciples.

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13.3-5)

I am convinced Jesus is teaching them in this moment as much about what the *incarnation* means as about what being a servant means. He is acting out the way he pushed back from the table in heaven, divested himself of his glory, wrapped the towel of human flesh around himself, and plunged to earth in a great divine descent.

Jesus comes not just as the servant of the Father, but also, unbelievably, as the servant of humanity.



Ford Madox Brown, *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*

It is for the sake of the very humanity who the Father and the son co-created that Jesus comes on a rescue mission – a self-emptying mission motivated purely by love.

As a theologically amplified version of 1 John 4:9 might put it,

This is how God showed his love among us: the Father, the Son and Spirit conspired together and they agreed that the Father would send his one and only Son as a servant into the world that we might live through him.

At the start of this hymn in Philippians 2 Paul says

In our relationships with one another, we should have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2.5)

And then in the two verses just before that he has already told us what that means. Here is how Jesus served us, and here is how Jesus calls us to follow his example and serve one another.

Philippians 2.3-4

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

At the bottom of that deep well into which Jesus stepped when he stepped off the throne, at the end of that steep path of descent, there was you and me, who Jesus came to serve.

And what motivated that deep dive, his stepping off the throne and coming to us and kneeling on the floor before us, was his love for us. His sacrificial love.

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10.45)

* * *

So when we pause to look at this baby in the manger, who are we really looking at?

Not just a beautiful and miraculous baby. Not just a stunning gift from God. But God himself, emptied of self, full of love, coming to us as a servant.

By doing so he isn't hiding the nature of God. He is *revealing* the nature of God. To think only of himself, to serve only himself, isn't consistent with who God is.

As NT Wright says:

The pre-existent son regarded equality with God not as excusing him from the task of suffering and death but actually as uniquely qualifying him for that vocation.

By coming to us as a servant Jesus reveals the true nature of God.

Jesus didn't lay aside his divine greatness when he laid aside his glory and became a servant, he *expressed* his divine greatness. Costly and sacrificial service that lays self aside is part of what true greatness means.

Beryl Markham was a pilot and an adventurer in Kenya during the early 1900s. I was deeply struck – and challenged – by her description of her friend Denys Finch-Hatton in her memoir *West Into the Night*. She wrote:

If someone has not already said it, someone will say that he was a great man who never achieved greatness, and this will not only be trite, but wrong; he was a great man who never achieved arrogance.

Jesus is a great God who never achieved arrogance. And when he laid aside his glory and took on the essence of a servant in order to make the love of God known to us, he didn't lay aside the essence of his divinity. He expressed it. In the very act of laying aside his glory he reveals what makes him so glorious and so worthy of our worship.

Would you pray with me?

Lord, what child is this, really? Give us fresh eyes to look on this baby in the manger, eyes to see who he really is, not just the king who lays aside his glory, but the king whose very act of laying aside his glory is glorious, the king of glory who deserves to be enthroned in each of our hearts and to receive our worship and our service.