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Sermon Title: "Flesh in the Game: Incarnation"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-15

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

We all have favorite verses of the Christmas story. I love the shepherds' part. An angel appears to the shepherds and declares, "I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people. Today is born in the city of Bethlehem the Savior who is Christ the Lord. You will find him wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger."

And I love the shepherds' response. "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about." (Luke 2:10-12, 15) And off they went. No one would blame them if they had been afraid or confused or frozen to the spot, rubbing their eyes in disbelief, questioning everything they had just seen and heard, maybe even explaining it away: "Too many mushrooms," "I told you not to smoke that stuff." Or simply saying, "Hey, we can't leave our work!" But no, an angel appears. A story is told. And by golly, they're going to check it out. Which, really, we've been doing for several weeks. We've been checking out the Christmas story every which way—pageants, concerts, sermons, Advent Devotional, gifts. You name it, we did it. We could have been excused for downplaying it—heck, skipping it. Heck, we all know the story by heart, and we all have busy, busy lives.

And yet, we've just completed the most astounding Christmas season at our Church by every measure: enthusiasm, excitement, attendance, generosity, faith, and smiles from Thanksgiving to Christmas morning. For a quaint little almost country Church, it was all rather spectacular! Which makes today what some call "Ordinary Sunday." It's not Advent. It's not Lent. It's not Easter. It's not Mother's Day. Not Pentecost or Confirmation, not Communion Sunday. It's past Christmas, it's not yet New Year's; it's in between. It's ordinary. Nothing special. Except, we are here. So I thought we'd use today to think a bit harder about Christmas.

When I told Alida what I was thinking about, she suggested the title, "The Dark Side of Christmas." Let's start with the theology: the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation. "The Incarnation" is where I get my actual sermon title from, "flesh in the game." "In" means, well, in. "Carne" refers to flesh, meat. So "in carn" means to put flesh in. God wanted to put on flesh and enter into our world. To be with us. To be one of us. To be like us. It is Mary who makes the flesh of God like us. She is us, human, fleshy, real, tangible.

World religions have always had gods coming to earth, even taking human form. Form, not substance. They were gods. Nothing more. Nothing less. Mary is attached to the Christmas story so that her baby, Jesus, is attached to humanity quite literally like an umbilical cord. God and Mary together in a mystical, spiritual union that defies explanation. I won't even try. The point is, divinity and humanity did it together in a synchronicity, a harmony, a blending unlike any other.

The larger point is God's desire to be fully, really, really us. And it doesn't end with the singular experience of birth. Everything about Jesus's life, everything, is God's clear statement to each of us: I know you. I understand. As Alida said in her Christmas Eve message, "I feel you."

There are parts of the Christmas story we never get to because they are hard, ugly, scary. They are the "dark side of Christmas." Even today I'll give a sanitized version.

When Jesus was born, his country, Israel, was occupied by a foreign enemy, the Roman Empire. Seventy years later Rome would totally wipe Israel off the map, literally. But in Jesus's time, Rome was just an oppressive, tyrannical, military prison, sweeping the country dry, desecrating the Temple, harassing the citizens, crucifying people.

Rome allowed Israel to have a Jewish puppet pretend king, Herod. When the Wise Men told Herod they were looking for "the King of the Jews," he was not happy. He didn't need competition, even a baby king. So he told the Wise Men, "Find the baby, come and tell me where he is, then I can worship him too (wink, wink!)."

The part of the story we celebrate is the Wise Men find the Baby Jesus, worship him, give their gifts; but then (and here's the part we always skip), then the Wise Men get wise to Herod's real intentions, and they escape. Herod is fooled and furious, and there's nothing more dangerous than a furious fool with power, and he orders every toddler in town to be gotten rid of.

The same dream that warned the Wise Men to get wise and get out warned Mary and Joseph to do the same . . . And so, the Holy Family escaped to Egypt.

Now, I was going to describe these post-Christmas events, the post-"Silent Night, Holy Night" events as "unimaginable" horrors. Jesus, born into poverty, homeless, hunted, a refugee, an exile in a foreign land, fear and horror all around him, enemies lurking. But it's not "unimaginable," is it? It is the all-too-common human condition.

Over the rest of Jesus's life, he continued to experience that "human condition" of joys and the sorrows. He had a loving family. They got to go home to Nazareth. He did grow up safe. He had meaningful work. As an adult, Jesus had the most profound spiritual life of any human being: his baptism brought rejoicing from heaven; he took the Devil on, one on one, and won; he found Disciples who followed him; he worked miracles and transformed lives; people believed in him, cheered him; he exercised authority over nature and demons; he withstood opposition and temptation; he taught in ways that have never been matched or forgotten. Quite a life. But all that all glory came with a price: jealousy, envy,

enemies, competition, infighting, backstabbing, betrayal . . . and, well, you know the rest. Lent. Holy Week. Good Friday. Arrest. Torture. Execution. Death. A lifetime of the world's hurts in 33 years by a man born of woman to show us that God feels us. If we look at Jesus's life as a "job description," his two classic jobs are: No. 1, to save us from our sins; No. 2, to earn for us eternal life.

That's what's called "Christology," theological rationale for having Jesus Christ. On the Cross he pays for our sins. On Easter he defeats death. In one weekend Jesus takes care of our two biggest worries: guilt over what we've done and fear of death.

But today I'm reminding us of Jesus's job description for ordinary time. Ordinary time is where most of us live. Day to day. The basic stuff. The real reality show of your life and mine. We work hard. Some people appreciate us, some don't. We love. Sometimes it works out. Sometimes it doesn't. We have aches and pains. Some get better. Some don't. We have friends. Some stick with us. Some turn their backs. We dream. Some come to pass. Some don't. We believe, we trust, we pray. Sometimes we are amazed. Sometimes devastated. We turn the other cheek, and that one gets slapped harder. We "forgive 70 times seven," and it's still not enough. We pray, "Not my will but thine be done," and when the other will gets done, we're not really happy. We get hired and fired, promoted and cut, accepted and rejected, needed and forgotten, sick and better, until we don't get better.

And, like Jesus on Good Friday, the end feels like the end. Until Easter, when the end is only the beginning. Sins are forgiven. Regrets are over. Tears are wiped away. Life is beautiful. But Christmas is for life's journey, the assurance that each of us is truly known, truly understood, all along the way.

When I was a young youth pastor in Haverhill, Massachusetts, my junior high youth group put on its own Christmas pageant. They wrote it then acted it out. This was 1969, a time when just about everything was questioned, debated, tossed out, or, reimagined. My kids reimagined Christmas. Bethlehem was Harlem. The stable was a fourth-floor apartment in a tenement building—no heat, a bathroom down the hall, junkies on the stoop. The shepherds and Wise Men were boys and girls, teenagers, long hair, tie-dyed shirts; lost, very lost; but looking. Looking for something. Something good, something better, some . . . one.

There was a war going on. Drugs and crime ravaged the city. The government was a mess. All authorities were distrusted. All around them people were "tuning in, turning on, dropping out." But some were still seeking, those teenage Magi. As my teenage Magi walked the streets of Harlem looking for someone to believe in, there were sirens blaring nonstop, police cars, fire engines, ambulances. Until.

Until . . . each time a cop car drove by a certain building, the siren silenced; and when the fire truck went by, the bells and sirens silenced, and the high-pitched wail of the ambulance silenced. Then one kid said to the others, "This is it. This is the place. Let's go see this thing which the Lord has done."

For them, in 1969, the hard streets of New York City symbolized the crushing reality of life. And if Jesus was going to be born at all, they decided, he would want to be in the heart of it all. They understood.

Around that time, some seminary friends and I were doing prison ministry, and we came across a prisoner's rewriting of the 23rd Psalm. You know it. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." And it goes on beautifully to tell of the shepherd's exquisite care of the sheep, leading to still waters, through dangerous valleys of death, to a table prepared for a veritable feast.

The prisoner rewrote it: "The Lord is my parole officer." A parole officer, the one person charged to guide the prisoner away from all that is wrong to a new life of true freedom.

Later on I began my travels—Central America, Africa, Haiti, India—and everywhere I went, the Christmas story was presented in art and sculptures and Church pageants, with black shepherds, Asian Josephs, Hispanic Marys, and Baby Jesuses of every hue; the Nativity scene a simple hovel of every kind—dirt, mud, bamboo, grass. In each instance people were letting Christmas show that God, through Mary, in Jesus, knows us.

The week before Christmas, this Christmas, our Christmas 2018, on Facebook I was sent a drawing: Mary and Joseph, with a little baby, huddled by a barbed-wire fence, soldiers on the other side, weapons drawn, a tear gas canister tossed at their feet. Yet again, the Christian story knowing our human condition.

On Friday I went to the Yale Art Museum, always a delight. On the third floor you're hit with lots of great modern art—Jackson Pollock to Picasso to Dali. As you descend, there are the great French Impressionists and American Landscapes and then room after room of classic ancient Christian art: Nativity scenes and Crucifixions, Christmas and Good Friday, life and death. The Christian art reminded me of the Prophet Isaiah, who told anyone who would listen that the Messiah would be "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." Someone who knows our lives, even the dark side.

Throughout the museum I was struck by a recurring theme: Hope. From the most startling modern art to powerful American Landscapes to the beautiful Impressionists to the ancient religious art: Hope. There was one gigantic modern art piece, lots of broken wood stuck on a large canvas, jagged, seemingly

random, everything brown and aged. Yet, two-thirds of the way down the canvas, a brightly colored square rainbow.

That's the human condition. We are sometimes broken and jagged pieces on life's canvas, but we choose to live with hope. However, most universal symbols of hope throughout the museum were the babies everywhere. Modern art babies, Colonial portrait babies, Nativity scene babies.

I loved another gigantic modern art painting called "La Vida," life. It featured a 10-story brick apartment tenement house, eight or 10 apartments on each floor, but the full range of life—la vida—being lived in full display on fire escapes and through each window. Every kind of human folly, evil, sin, brutality scattered across the whole building. But in just about every other window was a baby—smiling, bouncing, nursing, playing. Hope in every one.

And of course, all the Jesus babies in all the Nativity scenes: baby at Mary's breast, baby in the manger, baby with the shepherds and the Magi, baby escaping to Egypt, the weight of the world on his shoulders, the world he came to know, to love, and to save.

Our final hymn tonight, "O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," is No. 5 in your Hymnal. Let's stand and sing together

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and king,
the triumphs of God's grace!
tongues to sing*

*Jesus, the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace.*

*My loving Savior and my God,
assist me to proclaim
spread through all the earth abroad
the honors of thy name.*

*Glory to God and praise and love
be ever, ever given
by saints below and saints above,
the church in earth and heaven.*