

I read this week that a New Year’s resolution is something that goes in one “year” and out the other. Sadly, that may be true of sermons too. So in 2020, I resolve to preach better. And you can resolve to listen better. OK? (Excellent)

Now, do you know which two of four gospels contain the story of Jesus’ birth? Matthew and Luke. But if we want to get the big picture, the best place to look is in chapter one of the Gospel of John. John 1:1 reads, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* Long before the person we know as Jesus of Nazareth came into this world, he lived in perfect union with God. He was *with* God. He *was* God. And that’s a mystery we simply can’t explain, except to say that it was through him that the entire universe, as we know it, was created. John writes: *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”* (John 1:3)

It’s putting it mildly to say that Jesus was no ordinary child. He was unique and unlike any other child who came before him or who has come into the world since. He was, and is, one of a kind. The Nicene Creed describes Jesus this way: *“...He was the only-begotten Son of God...begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...”* While other teachers and prophets and religious figures stand out in history, only Jesus is divine. He was none other than *God in the flesh!*

Do you remember the movie, *Oh, God!* starring George Burns and John Denver? The gist of the movie is that God picks this unlikely grocery store manager and tells him to deliver a message, that he wants everyone to get along and live in peace with one another. Simple as that. At first, the store manager doesn’t believe it’s really God. After all, God looks a lot like George Burns. So he tests God in a number ways and, every time, God passes the test. Now, convinced that it’s really God who’s talking to him, he takes God’s message before a blue ribbon panel of religious leaders. They’re skeptical, of course, but, to humor him, they pose a number of questions for God to answer—like, “What were you thinking when you made the Aardvark?” Their most poignant question was this: “Was Jesus really your son?”

The store manager meets with God in a hotel room with their list of questions. God answers each one candidly and with a sense of humor. Then comes the biggie: “Was Jesus really your son?” God smiles and says, “Yes, of course, Jesus was my son...as was Abraham and Moses and David and Mohammed.”

Of course, we recognize this as “The Gospel According to Hollywood” and not the biblical witness at all. It does not represent the Christian faith. To give the screenwriters credit, it does have a certain appeal. It softens the disagreeable truth of Jesus’ divinity and puts him on par with the other religious figures of the world. In doing so, it encourages us to think that there really isn’t much difference between Christianity and all the other world religions. Right?

Well, no. I would say that I’m a proponent of interfaith dialogue. I think the more we understand and respect the faith of Judaism and Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism, and the other religions, the more likely we are to live together in peace. And, frankly, I think there’s a lot we can learn from each other. For example, I don’t believe for a moment that our 21st century westernized version of Christianity is all there

is to faith in Christ. I think our understanding of Jesus is largely driven by the culture in which we live, so that, to us Jesus looks to us more like Brad Pitt than, say, Sacha Baron Cohen.

Having said that, I don't think we have to water down what we believe in order to be in dialogue with people of other faiths. Specifically, there are two areas of the Christian faith we must never compromise: The Incarnation and the Resurrection. We believe that Jesus was God in human form and that he died on the Cross and was raised from the dead to atone for our sins and usher in God's New Creation. Others don't have to agree with that; but the Bible is very clear about these things. Jesus was none other than God himself in human form. He was with God from the very beginning, and it was through him, the Word made flesh, that all creation came into being.

When we look very closely at the person of Jesus, the first thing we need to know is that he is God. He may have come *in the flesh* as one of us, but he is decidedly different from any of us. That leads to a second point: In coming into the world as God *in the flesh*, in disguise, we could say, Jesus came to save us from our sins. That creates a certain tension in how we receive Jesus. John puts it this way: "*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*" (John 1:10-11)

This is a part of the Christmas story that we don't like to hear. We like to emphasize the part about the shepherds leaving their flocks in the fields and coming to Bethlehem to "*see this thing that has happened.*" (Luke 2:15) We like to think that, if we had been there, we would have, like the Magi from the East, brought gifts to give the child. And, you can be sure, our gifts would've been practical gifts—a warm blanket, footie pajamas, and a box of Pampers. What's an infant going to do with gold, frankincense and myrrh, anyway?

Yet, look what happened: Jesus grew up in the little village of Nazareth and, when the time was ripe, he publicly said, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19) He went on to say that this prophecy of Isaiah had been fulfilled in their hearing—the implication being that he was the promised Messiah. The elders of his synagogue were just as clear: Oh, no, you're not. "*Isn't this Joseph's son?*" they asked...*They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.*" (Luke 4:18&29) That was just the beginning of the opposition to come.

It's an age-old question: If Jesus were in the world today, would we recognize him as Lord and Savior? Just as importantly, would he recognize us as one of his devoted followers? In one of the most haunting passages of the New Testament, Jesus said, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*" (Matthew 7:21)

The heart of the Christmas message is that Jesus came into the world to set us free from our sin. And, while I hate to throw cold water on the warm glow of Christmas, there's no getting around it. To be set free from our sin is to turn from our sinful ways. Repentance and forgiveness go hand in hand. The degree

to which we're willing to give up *our own flesh*—our selfishness and our willfulness—is the degree to which we're likely to experience the depth of God's grace and truth. The more we admit our unworthiness to kneel before the Christ-child, the more we're able to sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!"

Ted Foote and Alex Thornburg talk about this in the opening chapter of their interesting book, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*. They ask, "When were you saved?" The answer, for a Presbyterian, is "I was saved around two thousand years ago...salvation is not dependent on one particular moment when we accept Christ. In fact, salvation is not something we do at all. It is God who acts; it is God who saves through Jesus Christ." (pp. 1-2)

While this is true, does it mean anything to say that we were saved by Jesus' if we're not willing to obey him or follow him as the Lord of our lives? Inner peace and lasting joy come only as we surrender our will to his will—not once, but daily; not by words alone—but as we take up our cross and walk in his footsteps. Salvation is both an accomplished fact and a process of becoming.

*Who is the Word [that] became flesh and made his dwelling among us?* He is God Almighty; He is the Savior of the world; He is the hope of our salvation. Listen, my friends: God sent his "*one and only Son*" into our cold, dark world to redeem us and to reconcile us to himself. John chapter 1 is a wake-up call for all who "*did not recognize him*" or "*did not receive him.*" (vv. 11& 12)

The whole message of Christmas is summed up in this chapter, in one verse, in four simple words:

"*The Word became flesh...*" Amen.