

Kory Stamper wrote a really fun book about—of all things—the dictionary. The book is titled *Word By Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries*. As a lexicographer for Merriam-Webster she talks about the agonizing decisions around defining words, which can take months. She tells about writing an email to a reader who was *irate* that Merriam-Webster has the word “**irregardless**” in the dictionary (which my spell check tried to change to “regardless” when I wrote this sermon). She suggested that the reader go to their online dictionary to see for herself that the word IS NOT in their dictionary. So in her reply Kory included a link to the online Merriam-Webster which she also searched, and to her utter shock and dismay, she discovered that **irregardless is in there!**

When heaven came to us, Jesus’ came as the Living Word. His coming meant that he came not merely in time and space. As Jesus prays for believers in John 17:20&21 he says, “*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. **May they also be in us** so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” Heaven came to us, but remember that Jesus wants us *in him*. Paul says in Colossians 2 the danger is *religion*. Or more precisely, he warns us this way: “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ*” (v. 8). Religion, you see, tries to make us conform to the philosophies, traditions and forces of this world. Life in Jesus asks us to live *in him* in order to become what we are supposed to be.

Paul says in Colossians 3 that Jesus is the person who knows who we originally were and, underneath it all, still are. Our lives are now “*hidden with Christ in God.*” Even now, in Christ, we are beginning to recall that life and live it anew. In this way, heaven comes to dwell in us too. We become the community of those for whom the unity of heaven and earth has already been restored through the work of Christ, even if that restoration is still agonizingly partial. So what if we are not who we think we are? Were we once someone else before we settled into this life? Although we don’t remember much, images of what we once were sometimes float through our minds. We have been told that someone is coming from the old country where we once lived to tell us about this other life. We wait with fear and anticipation. Who are we really meant to be?

A similar kind of scenario lies behind the Scripture passages we are looking at this morning. Who are we? Is it possible the message of Christmas tells us who we really are by telling us who Christ really is, and much more than that, it tells us we are **IN HIM**? “*For **in Christ** all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and **in Christ** you have been brought to fullness*” writes the Apostle. What does that mean in relation to the Christmas message? Well...

Søren Kierkegaard was a philosopher and Danish church reformer who thought Christmas was absurd, says Ron Walters.* The biblical Yuletide story—complete with a virgin, baby, angels and a host of nativity guests—was utterly irrational. “Nobody would have done it that way.” And that, Kierkegaard concluded, was what made Christmas so perfect.

During the early 1800’s the Church of Denmark had numbed the hearts of its people. Pastors were nothing more than glorified civil servants preaching pretentious rhetoric. Scripture was a non-factor. “After all, just because God seems confused, doesn’t mean we have to be!” Consequently, the warm hope

of the gospel had cooled. That's where Kierkegaard came in. His fight to personalize the Christian message served as a controversial blowtorch to the icy Church of Denmark. And his theological trump card was, as he called it, "a leap of faith."

"By necessity," Kierkegaard reasoned, "trusting in Christ is completely irrational. No one can be born into God's family by objective examination. You must take a leap of faith." And Christmas, as Kierkegaard saw it, was the perfect embodiment of Christianity's absurdity. It was the centerpiece of God's divine trademark—logical impossibilities. "An infinite and eternal God became a finite and mortal man!" The Danish philosopher never tired of that profound paradox, or its appeal.

One day, while explaining the Christmas message, Kierkegaard told a story of a mighty king who had fallen hopelessly in love with a beautiful young maiden in his kingdom. But, the king wondered, how does royalty pursue a mere commoner? Should his entourage descend on her cottage with blaring trumpets? Should he dazzle her with his royal crown, kingly robe and his title? Should his minions parade his wealth as he kneels to ask for her hand in marriage?

Or, should he simply demand her betrothal? After all, as sovereign ruler he was entitled to the queen of his choice. But, if he used his rightful authority, how would he ever know if she truly loved him? Ultimately, the wise king chose to lay aside his crown, riches and glory. If he was to win her, it would be as her equal. Alone, he arrived in the woods disguised as a beggar, seeking first her acceptance, then her love.

Kierkegaard's story is the story of the Incarnation. The undoable was nicely done. The unthinkable was well thought-out. Absurdity got an A+ and, as a result, "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory...*" For the first time in all of history, the Almighty stepped completely out of character as he took on humanity's weak form. Nobility was forsaken as he became a lowly Galilean Jew. He was mothered by a virgin, thereby casting doubts and stirring vicious rumors of his legitimacy. He was born in poverty, thus alienating him from influential decision makers.

And, if that wasn't enough, the timing of his birth was all wrong—a godless political party was in power thus blocking the path to his rightful throne. Even his big debut—Christmas' opening night—appeared terribly disorganized and poorly planned. Where was his royal crib? Where was the palace? How could the King of kings possibly be born in a stable?

And, who picked Podunk Bethlehem for a location? Is this the best Omnipotence can do? Madison Avenue would have laughed. Hollywood producers would demand a rewrite. What will this God think of next? A Cross? That's why Kierkegaard was so intrigued. Our God is a God of logical impossibilities. And deep within God's bizarre Christmas agenda was his choice of messengers to spread the "good news of a great joy."

But, who would he pick? His sinless, beautiful, powerful angels? They had a role in this story but as usual, God had another plan. He chose shepherds—defective human volunteers—to pass on the good news. And to every succeeding generation he searched for new recruits who would faithfully declare the Christmas story. Naively, *we* volunteered. And, just like that, we have become God's latest logical impossibility.

Once again listen to the message delivered to God's holy people: *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God"* (Colossians 3:1-3).

Most of us feel very much alive today, but God is a God of logical impossibilities! Our lives are *"hidden with Christ in God."*

How did that happen? Luke's gospel relays the story of how this came about: *"The time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them"* (Luke 2:6-7).

That is how "heaven came to us." We thank God for sending Jesus. We thank God for defying logic. We thank God for being much bigger than our imaginations. *"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness"* (Colossians 2:9-10).

Irregardless [;-)] of what you think about my vocabulary, the reunion of heaven and earth has begun. When Christ appeared, "heaven came to us" and we are now (and this is the key) **"in Christ."**

Thank you Lord! Amen.

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