

1st January 2107

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **190** **“Angels from the realms of glory”**
 199 **“Glory be to God on high”**
 208 **“Let earth and heaven combine”**
 193 **“Born in the night”**
 202 **“Hark! The herald-angels sing”**

READINGS: **Hebrews2:10-18**
 Matthew 2:13-23

“JESUS, OUR BROTHER”

We are in the season of Christmas – seven days ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus – Emmanuel – God with us. Next week is Epiphany – the showing of Jesus to the three Kings from the East, the Magi, and the event that marks the end of the Christmas season. For us, as Methodists however, next Sunday is our Covenant Service – the time when we renew our commitment to God and pledge ourselves to live a life of faith within the daily context where we find ourselves.

It is rare that we get the opportunity to reflect more broadly on the significance of the birth of Jesus before we renew our Covenant with God. Today is such an opportunity.

I would like us first of all to consider the scripture lesson we read from the book of Hebrews. One of the themes that runs through that passage is the fact of Jesus’ humanity. Just let’s listen again, “For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them (this is humankind – us) brothers and sisters saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters.’” And again, a few verses later, we read, “for it is clear that he (Jesus that is) did not come to help angels but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect.”

What is being said in this passage, what took place some 2000 years ago is so momentous that people have struggled to get their heads around it from that time to this. God, we believe, in his reaching out to people came to humankind as a vulnerable human baby.

Let’s say that again – God, creator of the world and of all that is and all that ever will be, became a child, a human child and lived a human existence. God, totally other, outside human concepts of space and time, all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful came to his people as a human child.

The humanity of Jesus is a far greater problem for many people than his divinity and his being both human and divine has given theologians a demanding task of understanding and explanation for the last 2000 years.

This passage in Hebrews is quite clear. God, through whom all things exist came to his people as a vulnerable human child. This is so difficult to get our heads around

that poetry is the only means to get close to understanding, describing and explaining it.

Charles Wesley was a consummate poet and we shall sing his words after this sermon. He described the birth of Jesus in these lines –

“our God contracted to a span
Incomprehensibly made man.”

Just before the sermon we sang in another wonderful Charles Wesley hymn,

“God the invisible appears
God, the blest, the great I AM
Sojourns in this vale of tears
And Jesus is his name.”

The third verse of that same hymn includes the lines, “ stand amazed, ye heavens at this” – stand amazed – that is a call to all of us for it is, quite frankly, amazing and incomprehensible that God loved the world so much that he emptied himself and came to his people in human form. As the very first verse of the Book of Hebrews states,

“In many ways and by many means God spoke in ancient times to our ancestors through the prophets, but at the end of these days he spoke to us in a son.”

The writer of Hebrews, in the passage we read from Chapter 2, uses verses from Psalm 8 and applies them to Jesus.

“What is man that thou art mindful of him or the son of man that thou cares for him? Yet you made him a little lower than the angels, you have crowned him with glory and honour.”

In Jesus, the writer of Hebrews maintains, this prophecy is fulfilled. Jesus who was made lower than the angels at his birth, who was crowned with glory and honour through his suffering and death, has been put over all things.

Again, here we have the poetry of the psalms being called upon to give us an insight into the magnitude of what was accomplished in the birth (and subsequent suffering and death) of Jesus.

“Our God contracted to a span
Incomprehensibly made man.”

The Jews wanted a Messiah, looked longingly for God’s appointed One but they could not accept that this vulnerable child was indeed the One. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” they exclaimed when this carpenter’s son tried to explain his

mission in the synagogue in his home place. They drove him out of the synagogue and tried to chase him over a cliff to his death.

For Muslims Jesus is a prophet and highly esteemed but not the son of God in human form – that is going too far.

So now it is for us, to cut through all the familiarity of the readings and carols of this season and ask ourselves, ‘do we really believe it?’ “Do we really believe that God came down at Christmas in a human form to be like us in all the messiness of human life?

And if that is difficult to believe there is another thing which is difficult for many people to accept – that is that Jesus suffered, that indeed God suffered. Yet this is just what this passage states clearly and what we believe we see in the life and ministry of Jesus.

“It is fitting,” our passage says, “that God should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Jesus, the pioneer of our salvation would perfect his work through suffering. Here we have Jesus, the pioneer, our older brother, leading the way for us, cutting through the undergrowth to open up a completely new way of thinking, believing and acting.

Jesus, our older brother, caring for us, leading us, protecting us and suffering not only for us but with us. What a wonderful image!

Our second passage for today was from the Gospel of Matthew and illustrates for us that Jesus was born into a world just as cruel and heartless as our own. Joseph and Mary became refugees while Jesus was still an infant, fleeing for their lives because of the jealous and vindictive King Herod. We don’t have to look far to see the Herods of our world today, leaders who are so jealous and power-hungry that they will stop at nothing in killing those who oppose them and intimidating all who would challenge them.

Joseph and Mary did not become refugees in Egypt by choice or because they thought life would be comfortable there. They made that dangerous journey through the desert in a bid for survival for themselves and their young child. That is what so many Syrians, Eritreans, Iranians and many others are doing in our own time.

Jesus came into the world as one of us in circumstances not so different from those that many of our contemporaries across the world face today.

But let’s remind ourselves – at Christmas God came to us in human form, to identify with the human predicament in all its suffering as well as in its joys and challenges. Jesus came not only to be our brother but also to make us into the children of God – it was a two-way process. In and through Jesus we have the potential to become children of God, in him we are drawn into the family of God. As he took on our

humanity, though him we are enabled to take on his divinity, to become truly children of God.

We said it in our prayer earlier this morning at Communion, “forgive us for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who became like us that might become like him.” We shall sing in the third verse of “Let earth and heaven combine” – the words:

“He deigns in flesh to appear,
Widest extremes to join;
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all divine.”

How amazing is this – to make us all divine! It means that in Jesus we have the possibility of being members of God’s family with all that that implies – the joy of adoption and acceptance by God but also the responsibility, the challenge and indeed the possible suffering as we seek to serve God in the world just as our older brother did.

It is New Year – January 1st – a time for resolutions. Next Sunday the 8th it will be time for our New Year faith resolutions, our annual recommitment in service to God in our Covenant Service.

In that service we make some pretty amazing promises – to follow the way of God in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves.

“I am no longer my own but yours.
Your will not mine be done in all things
Wherever you may place me
In all that I do
And in all that I may endure.”

We are enabled to make those pretty amazing and challenging promises because we follow an amazing God, who loved us so much that he came to us in human form, in Jesus, our brother.

So let us prepare to be God’s ambassadors in this world, his hands and his feet, his mouth and his ears as we play our part in the building up of his Kingdom now.

Eternal God,
In your faithful and enduring love
You call us to share in your gracious covenant in Jesus Christ.
In obedience we hear and accept your commands;
In love we seek to do your perfect will;
With joy we offer ourselves anew to you. Amen