

December 23, 2018  
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NOW THAT WAS A HAIL MARY  
John 1:14

I created a bit of confusion with the title of this sermon for a couple of people. They didn't realize it was a football reference. Oh, of course it would be. Who would think at this time of year it would have anything to do with an angel greeting Mary, the mother of Jesus, for instance? How silly. Of course it is about football. As you know, in football is an act of desperation. It is that last ditch act of desperation when the game is all but lost, the losing team throws up a prayer for a miracle, by heaving a long pass into the end zone in hopes that it might, against all odds be caught for a winning touchdown on the games final play. I found one analysis of over 7,000 games. There were 403 Hail Mary attempts in those games. Only 10 were successful, just under 2.5%. Not a true miracle, but close.

December 9 this year the New England Patriots played an NFL game against the Miami Dolphins. On paper Miami appeared to have little chance. The Patriots for the past 18 years have been NFL royalty, seeming to appear in the Super Bowl every year. It's an upset when they don't win it all. They are led by a coach some now consider to be the greatest of all time, and by the quarterback nearly universally acknowledged to be the best ever to play the game. This year once more after a slow start the Patriots were on cruise control, with a division championship a near certainty, clearly on their way to the playoffs yet again. Meanwhile, Miami was...well they were an NFL team. They were muddling along in yet another so-so season, a team seeming to have difficulty getting out of its own way. They were destined for another finish in the middle of the pack.

Surprisingly the Dolphins gave New England everything they could want in a game. They slugged it out with them toe to toe, and had chances to win that game. But in the end New England scored a very late field goal to put them up 33-28, with just seconds to play. Miami did get the ball for one final, desperate gasp. But they ended up on their own 31 yard line, down by 5 points with only 7 seconds left in the game and no time outs. They had one play left and they had to score a touchdown to win the game. Somehow they had to go almost 70 yards in that one last play. Typically this is where teams run the classic "Hail Mary" play. In that game though, the Dolphins couldn't even attempt a Hail Mary. They were so far from the end zone no quarterback could throw the ball all the way there. So Miami ran a play they call Boise. They call it that because they saw Boise State University

run it in an upset victory against Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl years ago. The quarterback, Ryan Tannehill, fired a pass out to the 50 yard line to receiver Kenny Stills, who caught it and promptly pitched it backwards to nearby teammate Devante Parker. He ran with it a few yards drawing defenders to him, then he pitched it backward to yet another teammate, Kenyon Drake. Drake cut in toward the center of the field, then turned toward the end zone. He got some big blocks from teammates, and suddenly, amazingly, a lane opened up. He outraced every Patriot player in the vicinity and rolled into the end zone for a touchdown. Miami won the game 34-33, and it left them with still an outside chance to make the playoffs.

It's being called the Miami Miracle. When you hear the commentators' description of the play you hear them say, "Unbelievable! I can't believe I just saw that happen!" They are saying what they saw was so unexpected, so impossible, that they have trouble believing their own eyes. They are stunned by it. We all know it wasn't actually a miracle. It was just wildly improbable. Today I want to draw your attention to something that was a real miracle. It was truly unbelievable, not in the sense that it is literally impossible to believe it, but in the sense that those commentators use that word. It is unbelievable, but it is real. It happened in the context of a truly desperate, seemingly hopeless situation. The apostle John tells us about this miracle in John 1:14.

### WE NEEDED A MIRACLE

I was trying to imagine Christmas through the eyes of little Ella, now 3 years old. This is the first year in which she has really tuned into the fact that a big event called Christmas is coming. She is actually going to revel in the joy of Christmas this year. But for her there is a question about why all of this is happening. Just what is this thing called Christmas? What is the point?

It has to be a bit confusing. Um, why did we get a tree and set it up in our living room? What does that mean? That's kind of a random thing to do, don't you think? Then take a look at our tree. It is brightly decorated with lights and all kinds of ornaments. But what can you discern about the meaning of Christmas from those ornaments on the tree? There are angels, stars, a ballerina, some trains, some toys, a baby, some boats, a candy cane, some teddy bears, anchors, a sled, a sleigh, some guy in a red suit, some reindeer, some tiny packages, and a number of really random things like a baseball player, a hockey goal, some fish and so on. So what would you conclude about this event based on the clues from that tree? You'd

likely conclude that these people have lost their minds. You could make no sense of that conglomeration of images.

The same is true of all things Christmas, which includes songs about Santa, bells, reindeer, sleighs, snow, snowmen, and the fact that baby, it's cold outside, even if it isn't all that cold. Despite all the misdirection, most people in our society have at least some sense of the outlines of the beginnings of Christmas. They know there was a baby born a long time ago. The baby was born in a barn, and there was a star, some shepherds, angels and some wise men involved somewhere. But much of the time people do not grasp the astounding nature of this event. It was so monumental that this great societal upheaval, the biggest event every year in our culture, is entirely justified. In truth, the celebration should be even bigger.

John was a first century Jewish fisherman, who years after the events we know as the first Christmas, encountered a unique young man. This young man, named Jesus, was the baby whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, now all grown up. John had never met anyone like him and never would again. He was the most unique man in human history. That man would change John and his world forever. He would revolutionize John's life in ways so powerful and dramatic that John wrote the story of his life. At the opening of that biography he tells about the birth of that baby, but in a totally distinctive way. Rather than giving details of the circumstances, which were wildly unusual as you know, John focused on the significance of the event on a much larger scale.

Any good and compelling story involves a conflict that must be resolved, a battle to be fought, or a dire situation that needs to be saved. In the case of the birth of Jesus, the story involves the dire condition of the entire human race. Dire actually doesn't express the depth of the situation. It was desperate to the point of being beyond even a life or death circumstance.

As the story opens humanity is in deadly peril. John doesn't tell us this up front, but he does communicate it, and the larger context of the Bible makes it very clear. The fundamental fact of human existence is that we are broken. We don't work right, in fact, we don't really work at all, and no amount of tinkering on our part is able to fix what is wrong. We've tried, and failed. History is full concerted efforts to fix the problem, but nothing has ever worked.

Isaiah 64:6 describes us this way. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." That's about as bad as it gets. We

once had an experience you probably have also gone through when a toilet got clogged and started overflowing. In a panic you rush around trying to stem the tide so that nasty, essentially sewer water doesn't inundate your entire house. We grabbed some old towels to block the water from flowing into the rest of the house. When we got the flooding stopped we used the towels to mop up the floor. Those towels are now nasty, soaked in that awful, fouled water. Those are filthy rags. Would you like to use them to dry off after a shower? Gross! You don't want anything to do with them. Throw them in the washing machine immediately. Isaiah says all of us, all humans, are so broken that our best efforts to do good and be good are exactly like those filthy rags. At our very best what we are is, in fact, repulsive. Even the best we do is fouled, tainted by pollution that resides in the hearts of every single one of us.

Well some people are really good, aren't they? Can't we just try harder to clean up our act? What people don't like to see is that the problem is so deep and intractable it is beyond our reach. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure." The human heart is more deceitful than anything else on the planet. Did you hear what Jeremiah said about it? It is beyond cure. By our own best efforts it is not fixable. Asking us to fix the brokenness is like asking my car to fix itself when a part breaks on it. If I did that I'd be asking my car to do something it simply does not have the ability to do. Nor does any human have the ability to fix the brokenness of human nature.

Well aren't you gloomy, Rick. You religious people are always so down on everybody. The thing is, the issue isn't whether someone is gloomy and discouraging. The issue is whether this problem is real. Nobel Prize winning writer, William Golding, directly skewered the idea that people are basically good in his book, *Lord of the Flies*. It tells the story of a group of British boys who are stranded on an island. Their civilized ways quickly fall away as they descend into savagery. One educator wrote that the book is about "the inherent evil that exists in human kind. Civilization cannot eradicate evil impulses and savage tendencies, but can only mask them... Take away the controls and the mask falls away."

In our brokenness we are cut off, disconnected from God. This, of course, presumes that God actually exists. But that's not much of a leap of faith. We know we came from somewhere and we see clear evidence of design in us and in the world in which we live. Paul Bloom is a psychologist at Yale University. After studying children he said, "when children are asked about the origin of animals and people, they tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if

the adults who raised them do not.” In other words, kids tend to have a concept of God even if their parents are atheists. This is a world wide phenomenon.

Psychologist Justin Barrett at Oxford University says that scientific evidence shows that “built into the natural development of children’s minds is a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and purposeful and that some kind of intelligent being is behind that design.” Barrett makes the startling statement that if a group of children were put “on an island and they raised themselves...they would believe in God...It appears that we have to be educated out of the knowledge of God by secular schools and media.”

If God is the creator, he is the one who designed and made life. He is the source of it. All life comes from him. I have an old phone that is misbehaving. Suppose I decide to get a iPhone. In the end I’m going to get it from Apple. They are the source. I can’t get it from Samsung, or Google or Nokia or Huawei. Only Apple. If you want life you must get it from God, the source. The Bible also asserts that he is the source of everything that is good. So when we are disconnected from God, we are disconnected from the source of all life and all good.

Years ago we had a plumbing problem on Christmas Eve, that turned into a plumbing disaster when I tried to fix the problem. We had to turn off the water to our house. When we disconnected from the water main, the source of water, we had no more water in our house. If you disconnect from the source of something, you will not have that thing anymore. To be disconnected from God is to be disconnected from the source of life itself and good.

Recently Ella has cracked me up with some things she has said. One day we were out in the backyard and she threw a small soft ball to me. I caught it. Then she held her hands out and said, “I’m open.” Where did she learn that? Her parents said they have no idea. Another time we couldn’t find a book she wanted to look at. She said, “It’s a problem.” Anna says that’s become a thing with her. Well if we are cut off from life and good, it’s a problem. It is a huge problem. In fact, it is the biggest problem we could ever face. Without life and without good we have nothing but death and misery.

Poverty, racism, injustice, violence, human trafficking, hunger, disease, are all problems. They are terrible problems, in some cases even horrors. But they are not the root issue of human existence. They are actually consequences of that root problem. You could make progress in fixing one or even all of those problems, and the root problem would still manifest itself and make a mockery of your progress

in a variety of ways. The fundamental problem, the basic starting point of the human condition, is we are broken and disconnected from the source of life. We cannot solve this problem on our own. We are helpless before it. If we cannot fix it, life will never be right. We will never be right and we'll know it. So we will never be truly at peace, never truly have joy, and will never have hope. This is the fundamental issue of all human life. It is the starting point for everything. If we have no hope of solving this huge problem there is no hope for us ever truly experiencing life.

### GOD DID THE INCONCEIVABLE

John tells us what actually happened when that baby was born in the Judean town of Bethlehem 2 millennia ago, and in the process reveals some mysterious truth about God. He says in verse 14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Wait, the word became flesh? What in the world does that mean? You have to back up to verses 1-4 to grasp what John is saying. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."

In those verses we can see some things about this "Word" that John wrote of. The Word was actually a person, not a verbal utterance. We see that John referred to the Word as he and him, not "it." This Word both was with God and was God. Um, wait. How is that possible? Let's imagine we're speaking of some person, and we say this person was with Laurie and was Laurie. You'd say, "Which is it? Are we talking about Laurie or someone that was with Laurie?" If I say, "Uh, both," you'd probably answer, "Okay, let me start over. When you saw the person we're talking about was she standing next to Laurie, or are we talking about Laurie herself?" "Yes." Well that's just nonsense. It is not possible for someone to both be with someone and be that person at the same time. Unless it's like me saying, "I go with myself everywhere I go." But that's just dumb. We think what John wrote is confusing and impossible.

Yet John was telling us something he insisted was true. This Word was a person who was somehow distinct from God, yet at the same time was God. He was so insistent on this reality that he went on to explain that this Word individual was the One who created everything that exists. There is only one Creator, which means

this Word indeed is God. John didn't try to explain that, because it is literally inexplicable. He was telling us that God is so powerful and infinite, that he actually exists in a way that cannot be comprehended by human minds. We have no categories for it, and we never will. Our task is not to understand it, but to accept it. Right off the bat John was telling us that something cosmic and mind numbing was happening when that baby was born at Christmas.

But what's the business of "the Word"? John would later refer to Jesus as the Son of Man and the Son of God. Why didn't he say, "The Son of God was with God and was God"? Why did he call him "the Word"? The Greek word John used that was translated "Word" was "Logos." It shows up in English as the root of words like logic and logical. This was a much used word in the first century. Philosophers used it in several ways, but one thing everyone knew. It was central to life. The philosopher Heraclitus said the logos was the rational principle behind the universe. The Stoic philosophers said it was that which causes life to make sense, which brings order to the universe and brings coherence to it. Philo of Alexandria said the logos was the agent of creation. He called it the "captain and pilot of the universe."

John's people saw the logos as how God communicated himself. It was essentially God's self expression, God explaining and revealing himself. So by using this term John was saying there was a being who was behind all of life, who held the universe together. I think he used this term because he wanted to appeal and speak to the broadest possible audience. He wanted all cultures, that were all familiar with this concept of the logos, to understand that this Word was the one who caused the universe and holds it together.

This is where it gets beyond incredible. He said this word "became flesh." He was claiming that the Creator of all, the unlimited one, the infinite one, the one who exists in a way that is beyond human capability to comprehend, somehow was born as a helpless infant, then lived on this planet as a flesh and blood human being.

Think about what that means. Estimates are now that there are 10 billion trillion stars in the known universe. That's 10 followed by 15 zeroes. All of those trillions of stars were made by the Logos. Every minute the sun emits 6 billion quadrillion calories of heat. That's 6 followed by 27 zeroes. It does that every minute. By the Logos all things were made, including the sun. Astrophysicists have seen a star 300

million light years away from us that shines with 2 trillion times greater energy than our sun. That star was made by the Logos, Jesus.

This person, with power so vast we can't even begin to get a real picture of it, was born as a human infant. He was that most helpless of creatures. He had to wear diapers and was totally dependent upon human parents to take care of him and sustain his life. He would grow up to be a human being who shared all the frailties of human life.

Down the street from us are a couple of boys, the sons of some of our favorite neighbors. They're a great family. The boys are terrific young kids, both of them. Imagine that boys' dad informed me that Benjamin, the older one, is in fact, the Logos. He is the Word in the flesh. He made everything that exists. There is not one single thing that exists that he did not create. He is the one who created the sun, moon, stars, the universe, life itself, in fact he created you and me. Hold on. You're telling me that my wife is teaching the Lord of all how to play the piano? That's ridiculous. If he is the one who created music don't you think he'd have the power to play it? Benjamin is a nice kid, and he's really smart, but come on. Let's get serious. This is a parent who has taken parental pride to a ludicrous extreme. And yet, John was saying this was true of that baby.

The classic movie, *The Princess Bride*, has a character in it, a Sicilian named Vizzini, played by Wallace Shawn, who repeatedly says, "That's inconceivable." This is truly inconceivable. This is the most astounding miracle that has ever happened or ever could happen. It is so far outside the limits of human imagination and comprehension that we truly cannot even conceive of how such a thing could be. We try to get a hold on it, but we always hit a wall and say, "I can't imagine how this could be." It just isn't possible. Yet, this is what Christmas is all about.

If Christmas was simply about a baby being born, it wouldn't exist. Babies are born every day. One more changes nothing and means little except to that baby and its family. Even if that baby would grow up to be the greatest leader the world has ever known, we might have some sort of commemoration of his birth. Maybe it would be like President's Day. But it would be nothing like the explosion that consumes much of the last month of the year. It is that big because it is the biggest thing that has ever happened in history.



Here's the monumental truth about that event. When we were helpless, doomed in that deadly peril, fatally broken, God acted to do what we would never be able to do. He acted to heal our brokenness, to restore our connection to him, to fix our souls, make us whole and give us hope. He acted to restore life in us and pour goodness into us. He did what nothing and no one else ever could. He did that which we need above all else. He acted to fix the fundamental issue of human beings, to bring us life. Without that inconceivable act, we would have no hope. There is no other way to remedy the core problem of the human condition. We would be left in the dark, broken, ruined, lifeless and hopeless.

God becoming flesh addressed the root problem of the human race. This means that all human problems have their core in the spiritual. If we leave out the spiritual it is like trying to build a building without a foundation. Inevitably it will collapse. In all of our personal problems the issue is the same. The solution, healing, begins with the spiritual. It begins with trusting totally in what God did when the Word became flesh.

## IMPLICATIONS

### GOD IS REAL

I realize I'm preaching to the already convinced this morning. You wouldn't be here unless you thought that there truly is a God. But we all have doubts at times, don't we? We cannot see God nor hear him, and life at times seems awfully random, even brutal, with little to no evidence that there is a good God who has anything to do with it.

It is imperative that we be reminded that whatever may happen in our world and in our lives, Christmas proves that God is there. In real live history he showed up in this world to rescue us miraculously. That baby was a real person, Jesus the Messiah, who walked this planet, taught things that are truly divine, truths that lift our hearts and souls, sacrificed himself on a real wooden Roman cross, but then defeated death.

These are not tall tales. They are not matters of speculation. They are historical events that prove God is the real deal. We may not understand what he allows in our lives, but we know that God, the divine Logos, intervened in human history on this planet. Christmas would not exist unless he had actually done it. That he could and did intervene means he exists, and he is both willing and able to act and intervene in this very physical world. Sometimes we ask God to show up. His

answer is that he already has. Theologians call the arrival of God in this world to live as a human the Incarnation. When I was young that made me think of Carnation Ice Cream, like the kind you used to get in those little plastic cups that came with a small flat wooden spoon. This is not about ice cream. Think more of carne asada. The word carne means “meat.” That’s the concept of Incarnation. It’s God, the eternal Spirit, putting meat on. He came to live as a meat being because it was the only way he could rescue us from that deadly peril.

## GOD LOVES US

John 3:16, some of the most familiar words in the human race’s greatest book, the Bible, says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Why did God send his Son, the Logos, into this world? We have seen that it was because he wanted to save us. But why did he want to rescue us from our plight? Because he loves us.

Christmas is the greatest love story that creation will ever know. The truth is, we were not lovable. It would be great if all of us were cuddly, cute huggable creatures. We all know that’s just plain not true. But we don’t usually grasp that real nature of the problem. If we could see ourselves as we truly are, as God sees us, without all the window dressing that we use to mask the reality, we would be appalled. We recently watched the movie, *The Man Who Created Christmas*. It was based on Charles Dickens writing *A Christmas Carol*. The movie portrays Dickens breaking through a writer’s block by imagining his characters come to life. So Ebenezer Scrooge, played by Christopher Plummer, appears in the story and interacts with Dickens. Scrooge is in the story a miserable excuse for a human being. He is selfish, heartless, grim, cold, cheerless and totally uncaring. There is nothing appealing or attractive about him. In fact, could we see ourselves as we truly are we would be much closer to Scrooge than to warm and fuzzy. And yet God loves us so much he went to the extreme of the Word becoming flesh just to rescue us, just to reconnect us to him.

I’m going to admit that, though it is embarrassing, I’ve watched some Hallmark movies with Laurie. It’s sort of a Christmas tradition for us. Recently I figured out something else that irks me about those movies. They all have basically the same plot of course. But what I’ve noticed is that the men in the stories are awfully passive. It is rare to see in one of those stories a man who realizes this is the woman he loves and he will pursue her with all of his might even if it means he gets shot down in flames. Isn’t that what a woman would want? Does she really want some milquetoast guy whom she’s never quite sure of, or does she want a guy

who puts his heart on the line no matter what because she's worth it? I bring that up because God did not play games, didn't protect himself. He went all out to have us for his children even though the price he paid was infinitely high. That's how much God loves us.

This is where the value and dignity of being a human comes from. God has created an infinite variety of things. But he only entered this world and put on meat, he only died, for us. Whales are magnificent, but the word did not become flesh for them. The same is true of butterflies, hummingbirds, tigers, elephants, even dogs. They may be marvelous creatures, but the Word did not become flesh for them. He became flesh to save you, because he loves you more than you can ever dream of. Romans 8:38-39 tells us that having become flesh, nothing in all of creation can ever pry you loose from the love of God. Nothing can ever stop him from loving you. We can be secure in his love, and that makes us different people.

Recently Laurie and I were watching television and they showed an ad for some upcoming show. Laurie noticed an actress that is going to be on the show and said of her, "Hey, she looks a lot like Carrie Underwear." I looked at her and said, "Uh, do you mean Carrie Underwood? Carrie Underwear is something a suitcase might do." She immediately burst into laughter. She didn't just chuckle a little. She went into gasping peals of laughter at her mistake. She laughed so hard she could hardly breathe, which, of course is wildly contagious, so quickly both of us were laughing and trying to catch our breath. That's one of the things that makes being married to Laurie so much fun. There's laughter pretty much every day. That's because she laughs so easily at herself. She is secure in who she is. She is secure in God's love for her, and she is secure in my love for her. So she doesn't need to prove anything or keep up an image. And that's what is going to happen to us as we come to grips with the significance of the Word becoming flesh. We become truly secure in God's love and in our dignity in him. We don't have to hide, cover up, pretend, defend, promote ourselves or keep up the image. We become free and safe in who we are, and we are able to laugh.

## GOD IS AT WORK AT WHAT MATTERS MOST

When the Word became flesh, Caesar Augustus was ruling over the Roman Empire. He was the proverbial most powerful man in the world. It is certain that Caesar Augustus never even heard of Jesus of Nazareth. He knew exactly zero about the birth of some random Jewish baby. He was the ruler of the known world. He had vast legions of soldiers at his command. A child born in a town in the

backwater of Judea to nameless Jewish peasant parents didn't even make the briefest of blips on Caesar's radar screen.

If you had taken a survey of 10,000 people in the Roman empire back then and asked them who is the most important person in the world, how many would have said, "Caesar"? Probably quite a few. How many would have said, "Jesus of Nazareth"? Probably no one. Who were the history books full of? Caesar, and others like him. But what was the most important thing happening at that first Christmas? It was the entry of the Word into this world, God becoming flesh. Probably Mary and Joseph had some inkling of what was really happening. Some shepherds and some visitors from another country had a sense that something important had happened, but even they really didn't have a clue.

The entry of the Word into this world was mostly unnoticed, and was totally overlooked by 99.9999% of the people alive back then. Everyone knew who Caesar Augustus was. Everyone knew about what he did. But nothing he did came even close to the massive importance of the Word becoming flesh.

There is an important implication for us in this. We know who the really significant people are in this world. We hear constantly about the movers and the shakers. Today we are inundated with blaring messages about the crucial events of the day. But the truth is, in the end, all of that may just be noise. It is utterly insignificant compared to what God is doing in this world, in the lives of his people. His work may seem invisible at times, it may seem so small as to completely escape notice. It may seem futile. But never forget that what God is doing, even if it looks tiny, is the most important thing happening in this world. The birth of that baby in a barn in the Bethlehem area didn't seem to matter at all. And it didn't change anything other than the lives of the baby's parents for many years. But the birth of that baby turned out to be the biggest thing to ever happen in the universe.

This speaks to me in a couple of ways today. A friend recently told me that he had never imagined that his life would go the way it has. He was disappointed. I've heard that quite a few times from people. It struck a chord with me. I once envisioned myself having more impact than I have had. But remembering the truth of Jesus' birth helps a lot. It reminds me that what God is doing is what matters, and the important things he is doing are usually not noticed by the world. So I can trust that God is quietly going about his work in my life and in the world around me where too often it seems like the wrong side is winning on all fronts.

Second, there have been 2 concerns that have arisen in my world. I either can't or don't know how to solve either one. How are these things going to get resolved? I don't know. The answers aren't visible. But I know that God is at work in ways I can't see. I can trust in him to do his work in his sometimes hidden way. So I can have peace, just as the angels promised so long ago when Jesus was born.

So today do not be discouraged and do not be fooled. Yes, the world around us seems noisy, big impressive, and God's work seems quiet, small, even invisible. But all the noise of this world will eventually prove to be sound and fury, signifying nothing. And God's work will be for all eternity.