

It's a privilege to continue in our Advent series. I want to begin the message a little differently. When our kids were little, we used to read them a story called *The Tale of Three Trees*. The gist of the story is that once upon a time, three trees lived high on a mountain and they dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up. The first tree wanted to be made into a beautiful treasure chest that would be filled with gold, jewels, and precious stones. The second tree wanted to be made into a strong and sturdy ship to sail on the oceans. And the third tree just wanted to stay on top of the mountain, and all he wanted to do was grow tall. When people would stop by and look at the tree, they would raise their eyes up to heaven.

So one day, three woodcutters came to the mountain, and the first woodcutter looked at the first tree and said, "This tree is perfect for me." And the first tree said, "Oh, now I will hold wonderful treasure." The second woodcutter looked at the second tree and said, "This tree is perfect for me." And the second tree said, "Oh yes, it's about time. I'm going to be made into a sturdy ship and sail the mighty seas." And the third woodcutter looked at the third tree and kind of shrugged his shoulders and said, "Any tree will do. Any tree will work."

The first tree soon learned that it was not going to be made into a treasure chest but would be fashioned into a feeding trough for animals. The second tree smiled when he was taken to a shipyard because he thought he'd be made into this great ship. But it turns out he was made into this small fishing boat. And the third tree was confused because he was cut into these long beams and just placed in a lumberyard and left alone. He had said all he wanted to do was stay on that mountain and point to God.

Many days passed, and the three trees nearly forgot their dreams. But one night, a young woman gave birth to a baby in a manger and placed her baby in this food trough, and suddenly the first tree realized that he was holding the greatest treasure there ever was and ever will be.

Years later, a tired traveler and his friends gathered in an old fishing boat and set sail on a lake. As soon as a storm arose, and the little fishing boat knew that he didn't have enough strength to carry the passengers to safety. But the tired traveler woke up, stretched out his hand, and said, "Peace," and the storm stopped. The second tree soon realized that he was carrying the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And on a Friday morning, the third tree was startled because two of its beams were yanked from the wood pile. He recognized an angry crowd, and he shuttered

when soldiers nailed a man's hands to him. He felt ugly and harsh and cruel. But on that Sunday morning, that third tree knew that God's love changed everything. It had made the first tree beautiful. It had made the second tree strong, and every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God, which was better than being the tallest tree on a mountaintop.

In our Advent series on trees in the Bible, we introduce another tree. This tree is made from one horizontal beam and one vertical beam nailed together. It's called a cross, and the cross is not found on the side of a beautiful river. It's not found in the Garden of Eden. It's not found in the holiest place, the restored Eden, the new Heaven and Earth. This tree was found pounded into the ground on a rocky hill called Golgotha outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

We began this series two weeks ago when Kevin took us back to Genesis 3 and showed us that God gave Adam and Eve this entire garden and said, "Enjoy it all. But there's one tree that you can't touch or taste the fruit of because if you do, no matter how enticing it is, you will die." It was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and God said, "If you eat this, you'll die." Satan came in and tempted them by getting Eve to question God's word and to question God's goodness. So Eve ate from the tree, succumbed to the temptation, and Adam then blamed Eve. Immediately they lost their innocence, and all of creation became cursed and began to die; sin had entered into humanity and all of creation.

Then their desire to become like God and to think they could know what is best for them more than God knew what was best for them, led them to make wrong choices and led them to sin and to suffering and to death. That's been passed on from generation to generation as humanity continues to defy God and think they know better for their lives than God.

In Genesis 3:15, we get the first prophecy about a descendant of Adam and Eve, who would be the Messiah, the Savior who would come and rescue the world. God said to Satan in that moment, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman and her offspring, and this future Savior will crush your head and you'll strike his heel.*" This Tree of Life, which was in the garden, reemerges in Revelation 22, the perfect new Heaven and Earth and this future eternal state where this tree will bear fruit in every season and its leaves heal nations. And it says that no longer will there be any curse.

So this gap between a cursed existence that's dominated by sin, evil, and death and the blessed existence in heaven, full of life,

peace, and God's presence, is about as wide as any of us could imagine. The gap seems unbridgeable, and the only way to bridge that gap is through a tree that existed between the tree in Genesis and the tree in Revelation, and that tree is the cross.

So this raises all kinds of questions that are appropriate to ask at Christmas. What was God's plan? How can the sinful, broken world become whole again? How can God stay true to his holiness, righteousness, and justice and forgive our sins? How can God stay true to his love, mercy, and grace and still punish evil and sin? What is God's plan to triumph over evil and crush Satan's head? How will God continue to build his kingdom and reign, and why would he go through any of this to rescue disobedient people like you and me?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the mindset of God. Our passage is in Philippians 2, and it reveals the mindset of God. That mindset behind the incarnation, that first Christmas, that doctrine of incarnation means God taking on flesh and embodying humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

In order for us to have the right mindset at Christmas, we go to this very special passage. And what it does is it privies us to the mindset of Jesus before the incarnation and the mindset of God the Father, regarding this incarnation of his Son. For us to have that right mindset this Christmas, it needs to begin with the incarnation.

Paul will stir us in this passage to contemplate Jesus' dissent from glory down to Earth, his humility on Earth, his self-sacrifice, his humiliation on the cross, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his ascension to heaven, and his exaltation as king over Heaven and Earth—all for the glory of his Father.

[Philippians 2:5-11](#), (click for full passage). This was probably not written by Paul. It was probably a creed that was read and memorized. It was poetry and probably became a hymn maybe 20 years before Paul wrote Philippians. *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:"* (Phil. 2:5). Paul is saying, let this mind be among you that was also in Christ. Have this mindset of Christ when you deal with your relationships. Within the church and in fellowship, have the mindset of humility, service, and sacrifice, all qualities that God had in mind when he sat in glory and waited for the perfect time to leave glory and come to Earth to save it. The incarnation was planned and premeditated. Jesus was locked into this mindset.

*"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;"* (v. 6). Now, this looks back at everything he was before coming to Earth. "Being" it's present; it's active. Jesus didn't become God when he was born in Bethlehem. He was always God. And the word translated in English as "very nature," in Greek, means his essential and unchanged nature is God. God is who he is on the inside. The

fullness of God is in him. This is one of the strongest statements in all the scriptures about the deity of Jesus.

"He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage." In other words, Jesus possessed equality. He was equal with his Father and with the Spirit. That's the Trinity, but he was willing to give it up. A good translation of that last part is he did not consider it something to be grasped or seized or kept. He didn't need to hang onto it as it was already him. And through the incarnation, he let go of something before coming to Earth.

And this reminds me of the contrast with Lucifer, who is also referred to as the Devil or Satan. Lucifer was at one time the morning star in heaven, who fell from heaven because he tried to seize power and grab authority and equality with God. Isaiah 14:14 says he wanted to make himself like the most high God, and then God brought him down. This seems to be a reoccurring theme in our Advent series that we're inclined to make decisions because we think we know best.

*"rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness"* (v.7). We try to make ourselves something, make ourselves somebody. But Jesus Christ had the mindset here to make himself nothing. He emptied himself. So with what did Jesus empty himself? What did he give up? He couldn't give up his divine nature. That's who he is. What did he give up? Well, the Son, in a premeditated act, separated himself by coming to Earth from the treasures of heaven. He limited his own personal authority. He became totally dependent and obedient to his Father. He voluntarily gave up these privileges to become a servant of God and a servant of man. He wasn't born to be an earthly king to rule over an earthly kingdom.

He came as a servant, or the common word there in the original is slave. So another essential and unchangeable attribute was that Jesus, at the core of who he is, was a servant. Paul says he himself, made himself human. So at the incarnation, God became physical. He received a permanent human body. At the incarnation, in his humanness, he took on that human weakness. God added human nature to his divine nature. So he has this dual nature, and in this taking on human weakness, he became vulnerable to the harshness that we understand in life and mortality. His body would age.

One distinct difference that I want to bring out between Jesus and his human nature and us in our human nature is that Jesus wasn't born into sin. He came to this world through the virgin birth, and then he lived in this world. He never sinned. And I don't want to miss this. I don't want us to miss this. At the incarnation, Jesus had this very nature of a servant, and on Earth, it was all about his submission to his Father. And that's revealed in the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane very clearly and in his teaching.

*"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19).* Jesus came to serve his Father and to serve humanity. And in his obedience to his Father and in his heart for service, he glorified the Father. When we serve, when we seek to serve Christ, to serve the Father, we glorify God. And that's the goal for all of us.

This service turned into sacrifice. *"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (v. 8).* So by becoming obedient, Jesus' identity was displayed, who he really was inside—humility and sacrificial obedience. What did he describe his mission to be? The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served. I love the encouragement that Peter gives us in 1 Peter 5 about humility.

**All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another because "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:5b-7**

We can sum up the incarnation of Jesus this way: He is God. He became a man. He's a servant. He died on a cross, and he was obedient to death, even death on a cross.

The incarnation is the ultimate sign of what is central to our faith. The cross is where the incarnation points. His life led to this idea of being a servant and suffering. The incarnation is tied to all of that. If you think about the cross for a moment, the intent of the cross is to execute criminals, but it's also intended to inflict as much pain as possible. And to humiliate the person on the cross—naked, suffering, public, mocked, cursed. I don't think any of us could imagine a more horrific way to die. It's offensive, but we can't fully appreciate the incarnation of Jesus until we understand that his mission was to go to the cross to accomplish what needed to be accomplished for us. We must fight to keep the cross central to our faith and practice. Our focus on the cross prompts us to confront our own sin. Our focus on the cross humbles the proud.

Here are some key thoughts this morning. This was all pre-planned, premeditated, the incarnation, and ending at the cross. That was all in the mind of God. The incarnation and the cross are at the center. It's between those two trees, the Tree of Life in the garden and the Tree of Life in Revelations. The Old Testament points to the cross, the gospels reveal the cross, and the epistles explain the cross to us. The cross brings atonement for sin.

Atonement is necessary so that people can be reconciled to God. They can have peace with God through Jesus' death on the cross; God provided a way through faith in Christ to have our own sins forgiven and for us to be reconciled with God. Paul says this in Galatians 3:13. *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who*

*is hanged on a tree.'"* So the cross ultimately, through the horror and the violence of the cross, God's goal with this was to bring satisfaction. Or what theologians call propitiation for our sin.

By suffering and then dying on the cross, Jesus took the force of the wrath of God, wrath that was intended for us because of our sins. God, at his core, is holy and just and righteous, and therefore in line with his nature, sin needed to be punished. Jesus voluntarily sacrificed his perfect life. His death satisfied the justice of God.

The cross also points to this idea of a substitute that Jesus died as a substitute for us dying. Our sins deserved death. He died as our substitute so that we might live through his death. *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).* So this cross demonstrated righteousness and an amazing transaction took place on the cross with this infinitely perfect man with an infinite capacity to absorb an infinite amount of sin. There's Jesus on that cross. My sins. Your sins, all of humanity's sins going all the way back to the garden, were poured out on him, and what happened? The Father temporarily had to break fellowship with his Son because his Son had become sin. Jesus had absorbed all of that in those few hours on the cross. Every sin, no matter how horrific and disgusting, came upon Jesus, the pure lamb of God.

So our sins were transferred to him no matter how awful they were. Every single sin, past, present, and future, and Jesus covers them all when we accept what Jesus Christ did for us and turn to him for salvation and follow him. When we accept Christ and turn to Christ's righteousness, his righteousness then, and this is the amazing transaction, is imputed upon us. His righteousness enters us. We have a new identity in Christ. A covenant relationship is established between God and us, and it's permanent; it's forever. It's the gift of eternal life and forgiveness of sins when we accept Jesus. The Holy Spirit, that third person of the Trinity, comes and lives in us forever, resides in us.

The cross also brings victory over the devil. Remember the prophecy back in Genesis 3? On that cross, Jesus crushed Satan's head for good. Satan's biggest weapon is to accuse, lie, condemn, and put to shame. I love what Paul says in Colossians 2.

**When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Colossians 2:13-15**

Those powers and authorities include Satan and his minions. By the cross, which was validated in the resurrection, he conquered death. The cross is the heart of the Father. When you read the Old Testament, questions come to mind. Who is the

Passover lamb? Who's the prophet, priest, and king? Who can fulfill those three roles? What is with the sacrificial system? As we wade through the Old Testament, we see it over and over again. Why must there be a suffering servant who saves? In the New Testament, it's all revealed.

We lose our way in our reading of the Bible when we take our eyes off the cross. We lose our way in life when we take our eyes off the cross. The cross reveals the righteousness and holiness of God, and the cross also reveals the love and mercy of God. The cross reveals God's heart to forgive sinners, justify sinners, and give peace. That peace we remember on the fourth Sunday of Advent that the world cannot give. The cross reveals God's heart to give eternal life to sinners.

I love Psalm 85 *"Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other."* That happens on the cross. I love this quote by Donald Barnhouse, "Love that goes upward is worship. Love that goes outward is affection. Love that stoops is grace."

So we've now seen how the incarnation reveals the heart of Jesus, and we see how the incarnation is connected to the centrality of the cross. Now in these last three verses, we're going see how God reveals the mindset of the Father.

*"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9).* From glory to humility to death, God raised him from the dead and exalted him. *"But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom'" (Hebrews 1:8).*

As I was studying this, the heart of the Father is fascinating to me. I think we naturally get that the heart of Jesus was to save us and forgive our sins. And it's from our perspective; it's salvation from our side. It's about us. So we get it. It's about us. But the primary thing here is that this whole story is not about us. It's about God. It's about the glory of God. Christ died for us, but he also died for God. Revelation 5:9 says about Jesus.

**And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation."**

Jesus' death brought people to God, and that honored the Father. It brought him glory, and this may be hard to hear this morning, but God, who is holy and righteous, had to sacrifice his Son to punish our sins and then to pardon us in order to satisfy his justice. The Father had to allow his perfect Son to be humiliated to bring forgiveness to us and glory to God. The Father had to allow his perfect Son to die so that the perfect, moral law of God could be fulfilled in him. No other man, not even a good man, not even a great man could possibly fulfill the moral law and forgive the sins of the world.

*"that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (v. 10).* We remember that Jesus humbled himself. When you think about the gospels, what did Jesus do? He humbled himself. He got down on his knees to wash the disciples' feet. And then to think in the future, just to hear the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow in submission to him. So the one who stooped to express his humility of who he really was, there was no act there; it was who he was—service and sacrifice, is now lifted up to the place of glory. And everyone who bows in submission will make a confession, whether in heaven, on Earth, and under Earth. *"and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (v. 11).*

It's a common name, Yeshua. It was a common name in that day. But then God the Father gave him the name Jesus Christ the Lord. What was on the mind of the Father at the incarnation leading to the crucifixion? What was on his mind was the glory of God, the Father, exalting the Son and giving him dominion over everything. If you read Revelation 19, it says that on his heavenly robe and his thigh, he has written King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

So the Father's view of Jesus is totally opposite of the world's estimation of Jesus. In my opinion, at best, the world sees Jesus as a teacher, an ethicist, a misunderstood man, and maybe the embodiment of all that is good in all religions and faiths around the world. At worst, the world sees Jesus as crazy, worthy to be despised, rejected, and eliminated. The scriptures should challenge our mindset this Christmas.

Do you find it hard to have the right frame of mind during the Christmas season? So many responsibilities, so many expectations, so many mixed signals about what's most important. What's your priority this holiday season? And I don't say that to discourage anyone. I don't say that as a discouraged person myself. I think all of the secular and selfish choices are out there to test us, to refine us, to challenge us to keep in mind what Jesus and his Father had in mind.

So how should this incarnation affect our minds? If Jesus is God, the right mindset is for us to be very optimistic about our future this Christmas. Let the truth of the incarnation put to death your pessimism. God is making it as clear as day that he is committed to you and that he cares for you and your family.

In Men's Fraternity we're studying Romans 8 this year, and we're learning that Paul wasn't afraid of anything. If you think of all the stuff on him, he'd have reason to fear. But he said things like, we're more than conquerors; neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons or any powers can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And he also says in chapter 8 that the Spirit you received does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again. But the Spirit makes you sons and daughters to cry out to a loving Father, Abba Father.

So if the cross of Christ can grip you this Christmas, you should be hopeful, but you should also see the things that divide us within our culture and within our world are nonsense. The Gospel of Jesus levels the playing field; educational differences, political differences, social, racial, financial differences, and age differences should not allow us to see ourselves as better than we ought or to see ourselves as lesser than we ought.

I love the hymn *When I Survey The Wonderous Cross* by Isaac Watts. "Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God!" Love God and love people, no matter their place in society. Christ came for all, died for all, and wants a relationship with all.

How about this? For those of us here who have the habit or pattern of keeping Jesus not at the forefront of our minds but at the back of our minds, I want to ask you this question. If Jesus humbled himself to accept death, why don't you consider his invitation to humble yourself and accept life through him? He doesn't demand. On the other hand, we're the ones who demand because we think we deserve stuff, but Jesus invites you into a better life that comes through his incarnation, comes through his death on the cross.

I encourage you, if you've not done this, to ask Jesus into your heart and turn to him. Have faith in what he did as your Lord and Savior. John Stott, in his great little book, *Basic Christianity* said this.

**There can be no sincere reaction to Jesus because if you don't have a sincere reaction, you really don't know him. People either hate and fear him or they're smitten by him. The average person in the United States likes Jesus. But if that's true, the average person doesn't really know him.**

So nobody ever just kind of liked Jesus if they really knew Jesus and took his claims and reviewed his actions seriously. In other words, nobody just kind of liked Jesus if they seriously read Philippians 2:5-11, this passage invokes a strong reaction.

And if the cross of Jesus is gripping you this Christmas, the only thing you can do in response to that is give yourself away as a follower of Christ. If Jesus Christ, who is God, humbled himself to serve and sacrifice for me, then that means no act of service should be seen as too big compared to what he really did for me. How huge was that?

So the incarnation of Christ not only informs us, it can transform us. It can move us; it can change a life direction, a career path. It can revive the heart of a man and woman and revitalize a family,

a business, the view of money, and the view of things. When I thought of that fable about the three trees, it got me thinking in a personal way that maybe for all of us instead of feeling like a grand tree, we feel like a feed box. I want this incarnation to remind you that through what Christ did on the cross for you, the greatest treasure resides in you. Whether you see yourself as a feedbox or not, the greatest treasure, the Holy Spirit resides in you to feed you and direct you on how to feed others for his glory.

And maybe instead of a grand tree, you feel a little more like a little old leaky fishing boat. Let the incarnation remind you that in your weakness, God's power and glory are revealed. When you're on the seas, and you can't manage it, that's when his power comes to call on you, and he'll give you peace if you depend on him and allow him to stretch you and use you. You will see his power work through your weakness. That's when he's glorified.

Maybe instead of a grand tree, you feel more like cast aside lumber in an old lumberyard. Not valuable for anything. Remember the empty cross, think vertically and adore God, and then think horizontally and show affection for people. And when we do that, he will use us to point people to God for the glory of God the Father.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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