

Incarnation; Someone With Skin On

**Isaiah 7:10-17
Matthew 1:20-23**

God comes to us to calm our fears.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
December 10, 2023

There's a sweet story that has been told by many preachers over the years about a little girl who was having trouble sleeping one night during a thunderstorm. After a while, she cried out for her parents, "Mommy! Daddy!" Her parents were asleep, up until then, and didn't want to get up if they didn't have to, so the little girl's dad called out from the bedroom, "What is it? What's the matter?"

The little girl answered, "I'm scared!"

Hoping to calm her down, dad called back, "What are you afraid of?"

The girl had an immediate answer, "It's dark, and it's thundering and lightning!"

Trying one more time before he put his feet on the cold floor, dad called out, "It's OK, baby, Jesus is right there in the room with you."

She cried out, "I know that, daddy. But I need someone with skin on!"

There are lots of scary things in our world, aren't there? Thunderstorms can be pretty scary sometimes. Daily we live with things that can strike fear into our hearts. Violence, crime, disease and death are all around us. Broadening our view, we see nations at war around the world, political polarization in our government, and a deterioration of our natural environment. Scary stuff.

Adam Hamilton wrote the book we are using as a resource for these sermons in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was just getting started. Do you remember how scary it was when we weren't sure what sort of plague we were dealing with? The world shut down; hospitals were full; casualties were mounting; and there were no effective treatments or vaccinations. Carey and I both have chronic respiratory conditions and so were at particular risk. Some of the precautions we took caused rifts in our family. I still remember the sense of relief I felt when we got a call that vaccination shots were available to us. It was a scary time.

It seems like the people in Bible times had one scary episode after another. There were plagues of various sorts, droughts that dried up their food sources, and every few years

their communities were destroyed by war. Like the little girl in the thunderstorm, God's people cried out for help and salvation.

We still need reassurance today, don't we? We still need God to calm our fears. Maybe we don't have locusts and Babylonians, but there is plenty to be afraid of. Over and over in Scripture, God says, or a prophet says, or Jesus or Paul say, don't be afraid. Have no fear. This week, my Bible app shared that the most downloaded and bookmarked verse for 2023 is Isaiah 41:10: "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*"¹ That says a lot about the world we live in, doesn't it? But that's what people need, and that's the consistent message of Scripture: do not be afraid. Why? Because God is with us. He will strengthen us and help us. He even comes to us with skin on.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer that makes the connection between the birth of Jesus and the sign Isaiah gave to a fearful King Ahaz. But it is fascinating. In the year 735 B.C.E., there was fear rampant in the land. The kingdom of David had been split for 200 years into Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The King of Israel and the King of Aram, the gentile nation just north of Israel, had made a pact to join forces to defend themselves against the invading Assyrian army. To add to their strength, they asked Ahaz, King of Judah, to join their alliance. Ahaz refused, so the combined armies of Israel and Aram headed for Jerusalem to depose Ahaz and install a king who would go with them to war.

Isaiah was the prophet in the court of Ahaz, and he gave Ahaz the word of the Lord: Do not be afraid; stand firm in your faith, and you will prevail against your enemies. But Ahaz was still afraid. The Lord spoke to Ahaz and told him to ask for a sign to prove the truth of God's word. But Ahaz was too afraid even to ask for a sign from God. So finally Isaiah said, "Good grief! You're wearing me out! Here's your sign. A young woman will give birth and bear a son and call him Immanuel—God with us. By the time he is old enough to know right from wrong, good times will have come back to Judah, and the nations you now fear will be destroyed."

The age of maturity for Hebrew boys, when they would be expected to know right from wrong, was 13. Between 12 and 15 years after this sign was given, the Assyrians swept in and destroyed both the kingdoms of Aram and Israel. But Judah was spared, just as Isaiah had predicted.

Every subsequent generation for 700 years remembered and celebrated the promise of Immanuel—God with us—as it applied to their own scary times. When the prophecy of Isaiah was translated into Greek, the word for "young woman" could also mean "virgin." So when Matthew read Isaiah in Greek, he saw the connection between Mary, the virgin bearing the Son of God, and the sign of Immanuel. He wrote, "*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'*"² Nobody else in the New Testament picked up on that; it's not mentioned another time. But it's key to our celebration of Advent every year.

Jesus is the King in the line of David; Jesus is the Savior of our sins. And Jesus is God with us. He is called the Son of God, because he does so much God-like stuff. He heals the sick. He raises the dead. He calms the wind and the waves on the sea. He feeds 5,000 men with five loaves and two fish. There is clearly something going on here that is more than humanly possible.

Jesus is also called the Son of Man. Some translations call him “the Human One,” which I don’t like as well, but either way, the title expresses the fact that Jesus is not only God, he is also human. Because of the incarnation, God knows exactly what it is like to be a human being. God became flesh and dwelt among us, yet Jesus retained his divine character. The Letter to the Hebrews says, “*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”³ Jesus is the man who is also God.

In the last 40 years, there have been several pop culture attempts to portray God as human. The first was the movie “Oh, God!” in 1977, starring John Denver as the confused human and George Burns as God, in that and two sequels to the original.⁴ In 1995, singer Joan Osborne recorded a Grammy-winning song entitled “One Of Us,” which asked the question, “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us, Just a stranger on the bus Tryin' to make his way home?”⁵ In 2003, Jim Carrey was the hapless human and Morgan Freeman played God in “Bruce Almighty.”⁶ After complaining to God, Bruce was given the opportunity to run the universe—sort of the incarnation in reverse.

The common thread in all these pop culture portrayals of God is the same thing that used to happen in Greek and Roman mythology when gods would appear on earth. It was just an appearance. God might appear to human beings, but God never actually became human. There was always a separation.

The difference in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is that God became flesh, fully entering into the human experience—pain, hunger, fatigue, death—not to be cute, but to save the world. Paul sang it in Philippians: “*Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*”⁷ There’s you some catchy lyrics!

The Good News this Advent is that God is still with us. Emmanuel is not limited to a prophetic sign delivered 28 centuries ago. When Jesus had experienced all that humanity could throw at him—even death on the cross—and had been resurrected from the dead, he gathered his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and his last word to them was this: “*Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”⁸ Emmanuel has no expiration date. God is still with us today, right now, right here.

Therefore, we do not need to be afraid. We do not need to fear anything. God has come to us to calm our fears. None of the scary things in this world have any power over us: disease, violence, poverty, hunger, anxiety, loneliness, or death. Even when we suffer—and we will—we can be overcomers, because God is with us. As Paul said, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!*”⁹

Therefore, we have a mission in this world. As God came to us in Emmanuel, as God was incarnate in Jesus Christ, we are to be the incarnation of God’s love in the world today. Today, Jesus doesn’t have skin on, but we do.

Martin Luther, the German pastor who was instrumental in the Protestant Reformation, said that Christians are supposed to be “little Christs” in their daily lives. In his book *The Freedom of a Christian*, published in 1520, Luther wrote, “As our heavenly Father has in

Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another, and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.”¹⁰

Four hundred years later, C. S. Lewis wrote a classic called *Mere Christianity*, and he picked up on Luther’s idea: “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, ... whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.”¹¹ That’s why we’re here. That’s why the church is here. Whenever we can help someone, whenever we can calm fears, whenever we can dispel doubts, whenever we can lift the spirits of any of God’s children, we are being “little Christs.” We are doing the continuing work of the incarnation.

In 1967, Doug Nicols found himself in a very scary place. He was doing mission work in India when he contracted tuberculosis and was committed to a sanitarium for several months. The sanitarium was a lonely, confusing, and troubled place. He did not know the language of the staff or the other patients. The health care was primitive at best. But still he wanted to share the love and hope of Jesus. All Doug had in the sanitarium were a few gospel tracts in one of the 23 languages of India. He tried to pass them out, but nobody wanted them.

Then one night, Doug woke up in the middle of the night, coughing so violently that he could not catch his breath. During this coughing fit, Doug noticed a little old emaciated man across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He was so weak he could not stand up. He began to whimper. He tried again, but to no avail.

The next morning Doug realized that the man had been trying to get up to use the bathroom. The stench in the ward was terrible. The other patients were angry at the old man for not being able to control himself. The nurse cleaned up the mess and then slapped the man.

The next night, Doug saw the old man again trying to get out of bed. This time Doug got out of bed, picked up the old man, and carried him to the toilet. Then he brought him back to his bed. As he laid the old man down, he kissed Doug on the cheek and promptly went to sleep.

Early the next morning, Doug awoke to a steaming cup of tea beside his bed. Another patient had kindly made it for him. The patient communicated by hand signals that he wanted one of those gospel tracts. The next two days, one after another, the men in the ward picked up the tracts to learn about Jesus.¹²

The world can be a scary place. That’s why God put skin on in a Baby born in Bethlehem. Therefore, we do not have to live in fear. When we love others, we put the skin of Jesus on, too. We become Christ for others. We become little Christs in a fearful world. That’s the meaning of the incarnation. That’s the meaning of Christmas.

¹ Youversion.com, December 7, 2023.

² Matthew 1:22f.

³ Hebrews 4:14-16.

⁴ Larry Gelbart and Avery Corman, directed by Carl Reiner, “Oh, God!” Warner Brothers, 1977.

⁵ Eric Bazilian, “One Of Us,” Warner Chappell Music, 1995. Performed by Joan Osborne.

⁶ Steve Koren and Mark O’Keefe, “Bruce Almighty,” Universal Pictures, 2003.

⁷ Philippians 2:6-8.

⁸ Matthew 28:20.

⁹ Philippians 4:13.

¹⁰ <https://xrysostom.blogspot.com/2007/03/luther-lewis-and-christs.html>.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 171.

¹² Wayne Cordeiro, *Jesus: Pure and Simple* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2012), 59-60.