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“The Incarnate Word”
John 1:1–14, I Corinthians 15: 3–8
Main Street UMC
September 16, 2018

Do you remember the song “From a Distance” that Bette Midler made famous? It begins with:

*From a distance, the world looks blue and green,
and the snow-capped mountains white.
From a distance, the ocean meets the stream,
and the eagle takes flight...
From a distance, we all have enough,
and no one is in need.
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease,
no hungry mouths to feed.
From a distance, we are instruments
marching in a common band.
Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace.
They're the songs of every man.
God is watching us. God is watching us.
God is watching us from a distance.*

It is a beautiful song and Bette Midler does a brilliant job singing it. As a preacher and a practical theologian, what always grabs me is the line, “*From a distance, God is watching us.*” Now I do not actually believe the songwriter was attempting to convey that God is removed from this world. However, many folks do indeed believe that God is distant. Some of the founding fathers of this country held that God was removed and did not interfere with our world. For example, Thomas Jefferson believed that way. Jefferson was not a Christian. Jefferson was a deist. Jefferson believed that God created the world but is removed from it. In fact, he believed it so intensely that he edited the Gospels. You can buy a copy of Jefferson’s Bible on Amazon and what you will discover is he removed all the miracles. You can read Jesus’ wise sayings, but you will not see any miracles in Jefferson’s Bible for he believed that the laws of nature are inviolable, and God does not interfere in our world. For Jefferson, God is like a clockmaker who builds a beautiful clock, winds it up to run, and then leaves it alone.

Now contrast Jefferson to John’s Gospel.

In John Chapter One, we learn that *“in the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God and all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”* John continues *“the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”*

The Gospel instructs that before creation existed, the 2nd person of the Trinity was. It is also clear that the 2nd person of the Trinity is not the same as the 1st person of the Trinity. God the Father is distinct from the Son. The reason why we cannot abandon traditional Trinitarian language of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is due to modalism. Modalism is the non-Trinitarian belief that three persons of the Trinity are not really three distinct persons but are just modes of expression of one monadic God.

John teaches us that the son (the Word) became flesh and lived among us. God is not a distant creator removed from this world. The son took on flesh and dwelled with humanity. To use theological language, the transcendent God became immanent in the person of Jesus.

So how does the Incarnation challenge us?

(1) Regardless of any gnostic tendencies that we may have picked up at a previous church or in some ecumenical Bible study somewhere, God like’s matter. Some Christians talk as if matter is bad, as if Spirit is all-good, and the body is all-bad. God likes matter. God created it. God created the stars, space dust, the dirt of the earth, trees, water, grapes, etc. God created all that stuff and said it was all good. We should remember this every time we take communion. Every time we partake of the bread and the cup, we need to remember that God not only created matter, but the Son became human and lived amongst us.

(2) The Incarnation discloses not only the depth of the love of God for us but also clearly, transparently, reveals the humility of God. The Word became flesh. The eternal God humbled himself, becoming mortal, becoming a babe born not in a castle, but in a manger. As the hymn proclaims, *“Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall; oxen lowing, little knowing, Christ the babe is Lord of all.”*

(3) God is not a clockmaker who wound creation up to run and then abandoned it. God never abandoned us, nor creation and God did not remove God’s self from creation. God did not stay away like some clockmaker. God has always been involved, involved with Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, Naomi, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, and countless others. God not only is not looking at us from a distance but enters into our reality. When we say that Jesus suffered upon the cross, we are also stating that God on that Friday so long ago also suffered on that cross. The incarnation does not safeguard us from illnesses, hurricanes, devastation, and agony just as Jesus was not spared the Via Dolorosa. We are

challenged by Christ not to remain removed from others' sufferings, pains, and injustices. Jesus entered into the human struggle and so must we.

When I was an associate at Providence Methodist Church in Charlotte part of my portfolio of responsibilities was new member recruitment. A couple had visited the church a few times and I made a visit to their home. It was a stately home, really a mansion. I was overwhelmed with its beauty. I asked, "Tell me what brought you to Providence?" They said that they had been visiting quite a few churches and really liked Providence because of its solid preaching and wonderful music ministry. They continued, "We want to join this church, but we do not want to be asked to do anything. We don't want to serve on any committee or volunteer for anything, no VBS, no Sunday school, nothing." I responded, "But Christianity is not a spectator sport!"

God did not remain removed from the game of life. God did not sit idly by in some celestial stadium betting on whether humanity would play good or not. God came into our world in the person of Jesus who emptied himself out in service to others. And as followers of him, we are called to go and do likewise.