

Christmas Eve

2007 MZSL

"A Down to Earth God"

Luke 2:1-20

Whenever someone is plain spoken, honest, genuine, and authentic, we call that person “down to earth”. He or she is the kind of person who is not vulgar or offensive, but forthright in speaking the truth in love. When we call someone "down to earth", we mean to say they are unpretentious; what you see is what you get. Sometimes, there are “down to earth” moments when something happens that causes you to realize “all this is really happening”! Like, “Oh my Lord, we’re really having a baby.” Or “I really just ask a girl to marry me.” Or “I really just signed that contract on a house.” Or “I really need to get to the doctor and have this checked out.” These are the people and moments that make life real and inspire us to get real and be our self.

Being our self does not mean Christians are free to be offensive and inconsiderate. But it does mean we can share our hopes and dreams and opinions without the fear of being judged or outcast.

In this day and time when image and status seems so important in the world we see on the television and entertainment magazines, -1-

I believe the everyday person hungers for a world that is more “down to earth”.

As we turn to the Christmas story of our Gospel, it would be hard to imagine a more “down to earth” moment or more “down to earth” people than those who were at the manger.

Sometimes we try glamorize the Gospel with the scene of the Holy Mother and Father with glowing halos of happiness; shepherds kneeling and kings bearing gifts; angels praising and a bright star making everything warm and cozy. But if we had the chance to ask Mary how she felt that night, I wouldn't be surprised if she said, "I'm exhausted. If you want to visit, please make it short so I can get some sleep."

Think of the problems for Mary and Joseph. Before the trip to Bethlehem, Joseph had planned to break off their betrothal privately...and she had to worry for a time that God's child would have no earthly father. And then, Caesar required everyone to return to their hometown to register for taxation. Late in her ninth month, she had to ride on an ass 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Even the IRS could not think of a more miserable way to pay taxes. -2-

And after going through the agony of natural child birth in a room where animals are fed; no drugs for pain; no Lamaze techniques...in come these smelly Shepherds. If only the Kings had arrived sooner with the Frankincense and myrrh!

But there **is** an important reason for the way God planned this first Christmas. Let us consider, who did God choose to be the first to see the Savior? Not Presidents; not politicians; not celebrities; but "down to earth" shepherds. Of all the characters of scripture, the shepherds were the earth-iest...they slept on the ground...probably went weeks without bathing...or shaving...or grooming. They had to trust in God daily to provide... and they had to be tough enough to weather the storms of outdoor life. They were the most "down to earth" people of the day.

Let us also consider that He was born in a "down to earth" location...not in a palace surrounded by gold and silver... but in a place where animals ate...in a manger...in the lowliest of towns...Bethlehem. The prophet Micah foretold, "O Bethlehem, Ephratah, you are small among the nations, but from you shall

come the Savior of the world." Bethlehem, a small town of 300 people in Jesus' day. But even in this little town, there was much apathy about God.

St. Paul wrote to Titus, "God's grace has appeared, bringing salvation, training us to renounce ir-religion

Ir-religion is religious apathy. Ir-religion is the idea that we can have faith by ourself...that we can have a relationship with Jesus without the community of faith. Ir-religion is the attempt to celebrate Christmas without Christ. Many have decided that God is ir-relevant...and the way God chose to show the World that He loves us and is not ir-relevant was to come "down to earth". Emmanuel....God with us.

Many years ago, Bette Midler had a hit song titled, "From a Distance"...The point of the song was that God was watching us from a distance. But the Good News of Christmas is that our God no longer watches from a distance...He came "down to earth" to be with us. I often stand in wonderment, "Why would He come to be with us?" He didn't come to fix all our problems. He didn't come to heal us of all our sickness. He didn't come to intervene in our griefs, trials and tribulations. He came to be with us. -4-

Some people feel very disappointed with a God who doesn't always fix us, heal us, or intervene. Sometimes He does for His own reasons and purposes that we can not begin to fathom. But sometimes He chooses to just be with us through the difficult times. I often wonder why He doesn't just work His miracles and wonders so that there is no death, no pain, no misery. But there is a reason for this just as there was a reason for the way He planned the first Christmas. You see, He wanted to make a real world with free will. Not a cinematic fantasy where there's always a happy ending and the hero gets the girl. But real hurts, pains, real choices, real tears, and best of all, real love. Real faith has to be challenged. Real grace happens only after the sin has been exposed and confronted. Real love is watered only with real tears.

God knew in order to reach us, His incarnation through the birth of Christ had to happen in an every day, ordinary way. It had to be real!

I'd like to close with a real life depiction of Christmas in a typical family. It's a story of a young mother of four very active children who had endured

a long Christmas Eve night of going to church at 6; cleaning the house and hosting a party at 8:30pm; putting a turkey in the oven at 11pm to slow roast through the night; and some where in between, she had overseen the annual ritual of opening presents and cleaning up the mess afterward ...and then finally getting the children their baths and off to bed. Some time after midnight, the house was finally quiet and she had a moment to sit down and ponder how exhausted she was. She put her face into her hands and cried...wishing Christmas was over. Not understanding his mother's tears, one of her little boys came out of his room and saw his mother sitting at the table in despair...He patted her on the back and said, "Cheer up, Mom... Christmas isn't over yet... we still have a whole 'nother day to go!"

Christmas is not a day to pretend we have no pain or no problems. But as God showed us, it is a day that He came to be with us to show us how to be with each other. God came "down to earth" to teach us how to be "down to earth" people. May we carry our "down to earth" faith throughout the year. Amen.