

## ***SERMONS FROM THE HEIGHTS***

*by Randy L. Hyde, D. Min.*  
*Senior Pastor*  
*Pulaski Heights Baptist Church*  
*Little Rock, AR 72205*  
[www.phbclr.com](http://www.phbclr.com)  
[rhyde@phbclr.com](mailto:rhyde@phbclr.com)

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Christmas Day

### **WHEN GOD CAME DOWN...**

#### ***“UNWRAPPING JESUS”***

John 1:1-14

My guess is there are very few of us here today who have waited until church is over to unwrap Christmas gifts. Chances are, there's a pile of Christmas gift wrapping under your tree just now waiting for the garbage bin. Before Christmas came, you wondered what might be in that beautifully decorated box that had your name on it. Now, you're trying to figure out how you can return it tomorrow without the giver knowing about it or without somehow offending the one who gave it to you.

Uh, I mean you're looking forward to enjoying the gifts you have received, right?

The very fact that you are here today tells me that you've got something figured out, something very important... that the real gift of Christmas is not that iPod or iPad, that sweater or coat or whatever it is you couldn't live without, but the Christ child. Otherwise, you'd be home sipping eggnog and relaxing after all the hustle and bustle of the season which has been going full force since before Labor Day.

You're familiar with the "before and after" pictures? When it comes to Christmas, we call it B.C. and A.D.... or at least we used to. There have been efforts of late in changing that as well. But you know what I mean: there is before Christ and after Christ. Now that Jesus has been unwrapped for the last two millennia, how has the world been changed? When you look at the before and after of the incarnation of God, of God becoming human flesh, as John describes it in the prologue of his gospel, do you think our world is different from what it would have become otherwise?

Before you try to answer that, allow me to give you a bit of ancient history. A few years before the birth of Jesus, there was another announcement of good news. Our expression, "good news," as most of you know it, I'm sure, comes from the Greek word *euangellion*. That's also where we get our word *evangelism*. This word did not originate with Christians. It was a common expression found in the everyday vocabulary of that world.

So, a few years before Jesus was born, another announcement was made. It was also of a birth, the birth of Caesar Augustus. When Augustus was born, in the midst of a great deal more pomp and circumstance than the peasant child Jesus, a decree was given to all the world. The Romans were big on decrees, weren't they? This is part of what that decree says: *and since the Caesar through his appearance has exceeded the hopes of all former good messages, surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good messages...*

You know what they're saying? Whoever came up with that decree is saying there better not be anyone else who makes such a claim for himself because this is the final and eternal announcement of good news. It ain't gonna to get any better than this. Caesar Augustus is born!

Now, what's the difference between that decree and the one John gives us in his gospel, because they sorta sound the same, don't they? The Book of Hebrews says, "In these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." Now, that's a decree!

All that stuff about Augustus... why, we know it was just propaganda designed to prop up a leaky empire. After all, we don't sing, "Good Augustan men rejoice, lift up your heart and voice..."

It also tells us how subversive Christianity was, at least for the first three hundred years or so. Claims were made for Jesus that could only be made safely for Caesar, and anyone who made those claims put his neck on the line. Caesar was god! And don't you forget it.

That is, until the God who set the world in place decided to become one of us.

Six years ago Princess Sayako of Japan, the daughter of Emperor Akihito, wed Yoshiki Kuroda in a simple Shinto ceremony. In doing so, she gave up all claims to royalty. She laid aside her privileged place in the royal family in order to give herself completely in love to her commoner husband. According to Japanese law, a commoner can marry royalty and thus join the imperial family (upward mobility, don't you know), but it cannot go the other way. And so this young woman who was raised with servants attending to her every need and acquainted every day of her young life with the glory of her royal family, gave up all of that in order to join the man of her heart. She and her husband moved into a small apartment where she began learning how to clean closets and organize a pantry. She started taking driving lessons for the first time and learned how to grocery shop. She was determined that it was not worth being royalty if she could not be with the love of her life.

And this is what we learn at Christmas. God was not content to be God without us. As long as there was one whit of distance between God and the world—a distance God knew we could never bridge by climbing upward (though the Romans tried, didn't they?) God would not be satisfied. So God became downwardly mobile. And in doing so, God not only loved us up close but taught us that God can be God in ways we never thought possible.<sup>1</sup>

While a lot has changed in our world since Jesus was born, there is one thing that never has changed and never will. God still loves the world so much that he gave his only Son.

Lloyd C. Douglas authored several novels, including the highly regarded one about the garment of Jesus, *The Robe*. A lesser known novel he wrote is called *The Big Fisherman*. I read it as a high school student, and it had a profound affect on me. In fact, it was highly influential in my decision to follow Jesus as a Christian minister.

Douglas tells about living in the same boarding house during college as an elderly and invalid music teacher. One morning, the young Douglas was making small talk with the older gentleman and asked flippantly, “What’s the good news?” He got more answer than he expected. The old man tapped a tuning fork on his metal wheelchair and said, “That’s middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but my friend, THAT is middle C!”<sup>2</sup>

The world around us may decline or even fall off the face of the universe, but one thing will never change... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. It is the middle C of our faith. So is it too much to ask that we give a little of that love back?

As you have unwrapped Jesus this Christmas, what is it about you that has changed? Anything? Anything at all? In a Christmas pageant somewhere, a little boy was playing the part of the innkeeper in Bethlehem. When Mary and Joseph knocked on the door, all he was scripted to do was to say, “No room.” That’s all, just, “No room.” But when the time came, the usually unruly child became tearful and impetuous. “Wait,” he said, “Wait. You can have my room!”

If you have room for others in your heart and life, if you would welcome Christ to make his home with you, something has changed because of Christmas. Maybe someone. Maybe you.<sup>3</sup>

When you get home, look again under your Christmas tree, the one that now seems so empty of gifts. You might find that this time around, with his divine and never-ending love, Jesus has unwrapped you. If so, what did he find?

*Unwrap us, O Lord, with your love and grace. And then find us faithful in following the One whose birth we celebrate this day. Amen.*

### ***Notes***

<sup>1</sup>George Mason, “Before and After” (unpublished sermon), December 25, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, quoting David Matthews, “Before Bethlehem,” in *Sunday Worship Helps* (Dec. 2005): 8.

<sup>3</sup>Mason, Ibid.