

Incarnation

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Preacher: Heidi Mills

[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. Pastor Anthony really did me a solid because he basically did my entire introduction. I'm Heidi Mills, Director of Community, and also serve as an intern here.

And I was going to start my sermon with talking about Advent, but thankfully, Pastor Anthony has already done that. Um, so the idea of Advent, though, is rooted in this idea of God coming to earth in the form of Jesus Christ, in the form of a baby.

This is what we commonly call in the church, the Incarnation. It's kind of one of those million-dollar church words that we use all the time. And I will be really diving deeply into that idea of Incarnation during this sermon.

But the season of Advent is all about being a time of learning how to wait and learning how to hope again.

It's these four weeks where we know that Jesus is coming, but Jesus has not arrived yet. And so we are learning how to slow down, to be patient, to wait, and to have hope.

[1 : 13] And there is no shortage of the need for hope in these times. We live in a world that often seems dark and weary, just tired.

I am looking outside right now, and the sun has already set, and it's barely after five o'clock. So physically, we are entering into the darkest time of the year.

And it makes sense that we are talking about this event of the Incarnation, because right now, there are many reasons for the darkness that we are facing.

But I think one of those reasons is that we are beginning to lose sight of what it means to be embodied ourselves. We seem to be living an increasingly disembodied existence.

We only have to look so far as the pandemic to kind of understand where I'm getting at here. For the past year and a half, we have had to take a step back from meeting with people physically.

[2 : 14] We have had to social distance to partake in so many aspects of our life online. We've had to go to church online. I have had to go to seminary online.

And this takes a toll on us, where we have to rely on these two-dimensional forms of communication when we have our bodies. And I think all of us can recognize that there is something different, something missing, as much as we try to make the best out of these new forms of communication.

Another example is social media. Social media has done a lot of good, but I think that it often makes us rely too much on that instant sense of connection that doesn't really cost us anything.

And I have often found myself scrolling my phone or looking at Instagram or Facebook, trying to figure out if the right person has liked my Facebook status or not, instead of being present with the person right in front of me.

And our society constantly tells us, in so many different ways, that our bodies need to be fixed or changed. We seem to have this disordered relationship with our own bodies and the bodies of others.

[3 : 33] So as we begin the season of Advent, this sermon series is kind of an unconventional take on what we typically talk about during Advent.

It is an attempt to reclaim this concept of embodiment or incarnation. We have drawn inspiration from a quote by Toni Morrison, and one of the main characters in her novel *Beloved* preaches, In this here place, we flesh.

During this sermon, I have the honor, that also kind of terrifies me a little bit, of setting up the rest of this sermon series, as we are diving into the idea of incarnation.

So my main aim in this sermon is to examine the depths of the incarnation. I'm going to talk about Jesus' incarnation, yes, the event of Jesus coming to earth in the form of a baby.

But I want to expand our viewpoint of what incarnation means to ourselves as incarnate beings, to others, and finally to all of creation.

[4 : 40] So we're going to cover a lot of ground. The main point, which I'm going to put up on the screen, is that the reality of Jesus' incarnation brings us back to our bodies and connects us to God's presence in all creation.

This is going to be a touchstone for the rest of the sermon. We're going to be returning to this sentence time and time again as I walk us through this. And I saw a glimpse of it up there, but I also provided a roadmap.

So we are going to start with Jesus' incarnation, what that means, what that says about God's relationship to humanity. Then we are going to talk about our own incarnation as embodied people in the image of God.

And then we're going to talk about the incarnation of others, and finally the incarnate creation. And so that's a lot. I am going to be using the terms embodiment and incarnation interchangeably.

For the purposes of this sermon, they basically mean the same thing. So just bear that in mind. So moving right along, we are going to start with the reality of Jesus' incarnation.

[5 : 53] In John 1, verse 14, we read, The Word became flesh and made his home among us. Right off the bat, John does not really do me any favors here, because I have to define what the Word means.

It is doing a lot of heavy theological work. But basically, the Word in the ancient language is logos, or divine wisdom.

It ties back to John 1, verse 1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Word was in the beginning with God. So what John is basically saying is that the Word is God. So therefore, we can translate this into, God became a human being and made God's home among us.

This leads me into my working definition of the incarnation, which is that God is fully present in the fully human Jesus Christ.

[7 : 04] Now, this idea has lost a bit of its sparkle today. If you've grown up in the church, you've probably heard this phrase, Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, many, many times.

That it kind of goes in one ear and out the other. But I think we have to look back and see how this idea of the incarnation, once people kind of tried to figure out what this actually meant, it shook the foundations of the ancient world.

And it has the potential to do so here and now. In the time in which this was written, one idea that held a lot of sway was Plato's idea of dualism.

So Plato kind of set up this divide between the body on one hand, the body was seen as weak and fragile and something that needed to constantly be held into check.

And then on the other hand, there was the spirit. And the spirit was considered the highest form, that we needed to focus on spiritual enlightenment. And that was the main aim of human life.

[8 : 10] And shades of this idea still exist today within the church. We even see it in Paul when he says, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

That's basically what this dualism is telling us to do, to kind of set up this battle or this fight between our spirit, which is able to connect with God, and our bodies, which in many ways people view as not able to.

However, the incarnation kind of shatters that binary. Because here we have God who decides to take on the form of a human being.

God does not separate God's self from the reality of our life. Instead, God entered into the particular realities of being embodied. Through Jesus, God knows what it means to be human.

I want to unpack this a little bit with this idea that through Jesus, through the incarnation, God became vulnerable. And this is an idea that is kind of counterintuitive, because we often don't view God as being vulnerable.

[9 : 21] But I want us to consider this idea of Jesus' birth. I recently read Rachel Held Everton's book, Wholehearted Faith. And in the first chapter, she has this meditation on the incarnation.

She writes about how Jesus started as a zygote in Mary's womb. Jesus grew fingers and toes. Jesus was born crying and covered in blood.

Jesus needed his mother's milk to survive. Jesus was wholly dependent on God for every... Jesus was wholly dependent on humans for everything. Jesus was wholly dependent on humans for everything.

Jesus was wholly dependent on humans for everything. And so that tells us something about how vulnerability is not a bad thing, and that God knows what it is like to be vulnerable, which I think is insane.

Yeah. And then I think we often have to consider how, through Jesus, God is present in particular circumstances.

[10 : 29] Jesus is. So Jesus, the man, the one who existed 2,000 years ago, was shaped by the realities of his embodied life. Jesus' physical identity mattered just as much as his spiritual identity.

Too often, when we talk about Jesus, we can try to make Jesus into our own image. In many white churches, we often say that we often put up these images of, like, Jesus as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white man who looks like Obi-Wan Kenobi.

And that is not what Jesus looked like. That's not what Jesus' embodied life was like. Instead, Jesus was born to Joseph and Mary, a poor family in Bethlehem.

He lived in Nazareth, which was considered a town for no-gooders. People said nothing good could ever come out of Nazareth. And then he was a brown-skinned Jewish man living under the realities of oppression.

And his ministry, his desire to pursue the good for all people, was what eventually led to his crucifixion. So through all of that, through Jesus' embodied life, God was present.

[11 : 49] And that allows us to view ourselves differently, to recognize that God is present to us as well, in our vulnerability and the unique particular circumstances of our life.

That leads me to the next movement. So we've gone from Jesus' incarnation, and now we are going to flow right into our own incarnation.

In my main idea of this sermon, to go back to it, the reality of Jesus' incarnation brings us back to our bodies.

Jesus became incarnate in human form. We are also incarnate beings, not merely spiritual ones. And I think this is so important for us to keep in mind in the church, because I know for me and my experience growing up in the church, there is often so much focus on our spirit, on our souls, on making sure that we go to heaven after we die.

And our physical realities often get less focus. However, none of us will ever meet with God apart from our bodies.

[13 : 04] Like, we are spiritual beings, but we also exist in this world. And sitting here today, like, we are not able to be present and meet with God apart from our bodies.

And what is important for us to recognize in this is that from the beginning, our bodies were declared good. In Genesis 1, God forms us from the dust of the ground and makes us in God's image.

And God lives within every single one of us. And as I was preparing this sermon, I was thinking about how it was only after the fall that people started to feel shame about their bodies, that they felt, oh, I need to cover these up.

I need to hide not only from others, but from God. So from the beginning, our bodies are declared very good.

And it is only the fall that distorts that. Psalm 139, verse 14 reads, I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

[14 : 13] Wonderful are your works, that I know very well. We often struggle with this verse, or at least I often struggle with this verse, with learning to view myself as fearfully and wonderfully made.

I mentioned in my introduction that our society often tries to damage our view of ourselves, to convince us that there is something wrong with us, that we need to fix with cosmetics, with surgery, with diets, with all of these things that tell us we need to fit this mold of what humans should look like.

We can fluctuate between this idea of self-indulgence, of doing whatever we want, whatever feels good to our bodies in the moment, or else this idea of self-neglect.

And for me, this idea of neglecting the body is something that I have experienced to myself. I often try to divorce what's going on internally, in my spirit, in my emotions, from my physical body.

Some of you know this, some of you don't, but I have a lot going on from work, to school, to church, to family, the whole laundry list of obligations over the course of the day.

[15 : 36] And I often feel a lot of stress and anxiety related to that. I feel often that I need to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders.

And that belief has had a physical manifestation. A couple weeks ago on Saturday, I woke up with awful neck pain.

Like I couldn't even move my head one direction or another without it hurting. It was just so, so tight. And I couldn't even really sleep because if you've ever experienced neck pain, you know that like, there's really no comfortable position.

And I know that like, it has to do with the stress that I was under. That it had a physical effect. Because our emotions live in our bodies. And the stress that I was feeling, it was right here in the back of my neck and down my collarbone.

And I felt that tightness. I still kind of feel it. And I tell that story because I want us to recognize the fact that all of our emotions influence us physically.

[16 : 48] Whether that's stress, whether that's happiness, whether that's anxiety, it all lives somewhere. And I think we have to keep that in mind. We need to restore a healthy view of our bodies.

We were meant to care for our whole selves as an image of God, not just our spirits. A question for us to ponder is how can we learn to love our bodies exactly as God created them?

There are so many messages we receive that tell us not to do this. Some of us may be feeling like, oh, I need to work off that extra piece of pie I had at Thanksgiving. Or we had a comment made by someone about some aspect of our physical appearance that made us feel shame and guilt, that there was something wrong with us, that our weight or our height or our gender expression or the clothes that we wear matter more to us or that there was something wrong with the way that we express ourselves.

But God is making God's home within us. We are all images of the living God.

So I want us to consider how we can bring ourselves back to our bodies. What are some ways we can honor our body in this moment? And so we've considered our bodies.

[18 : 23] And now I want to move us into the incarnation of others. The final part of my main idea is this.

The reality of Jesus's incarnation brings us back to our bodies and connects us to God's presence in all creation. So moving from Jesus's incarnation to our incarnation and to the incarnation of others.

Once we learn to view ourselves as fearfully and wonderfully made, we can view others in the same way. One of the truest statements that I can make from up here is that every single person was made in the image of God.

And every single person is deeply and completely loved by that same God. I can think of little else that is more true than that, that I can say.

Yet our world has forgotten this reality. Too often we are told that people need to fit into some arbitrary ideal or that some bodies are worth more than others.

[19 : 37] I can speak from my own experience as a woman where I often feel that I need to fit some mold, that I need to be skinnier, or I need to be taller, or I need to wear more makeup, that I need to get rid of my acne.

All of these things that distort my view of myself. And those of us who identify as women can in some ways acknowledge the ways that we deal with objectification and unfair beauty standards that are all around us.

And this extends to people who identify as male who often feel those toxic masculine standards of projecting strength and not weakness, of projecting might and not showing your vulnerability.

And if you're non-binary, we don't know what to do with you because you don't fit into the mold that we have created. So all of these ways we distort the embodiment of others.

And we also prize whiteness, skinniness, able-bodiedness, all of these ways that we fail to see the fact that God created all of us in God's image.

[20 : 53] Yet, when we rediscover this fact that everyone is made in the image of God, we can begin to find our way back to each other.

We see each other more clearly for who we really are. We recognize the infinite ways that we embody characteristics of the living God who never fits into that box that we try to put God in.

We recognize that we are all connected to each other through the God who created each of us. And then, once we make this shift in our thinking, we can reject these ideas about God that are used to enslave certain bodies and instead join the God who is always involved in freeing the body, in freeing everybody.

And learning to honor the embodiment of others is this first step toward justice for all people, not just people who look like us. This leads me to my final movement.

So, to recap, once again, we've gone from Jesus' incarnation, this particular moment. And then we've moved to our own incarnation, to the incarnation of others.

[22 : 12] And now we are going to talk about the incarnate creation. In John chapter 1, verse 3, we read, all things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being.

And then Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 through 17, expand this idea. He, meaning Jesus, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

For in him, all things, in heaven and on earth, were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him, all things hold together. This contains echoes of the original intent for all creation.

When in Genesis, God created everything, and he called it, God called it very good. Through Jesus, God is present in all creation.

[23 : 29] That's what these verses are telling us. Yet we have a distorted view often about our physical environment. We think that, oh, we are created in the image of God, and so that therefore means that we have permission or license to do whatever we want with creation because God has allowed us to subdue it, to subjugate it.

However, if we begin to recognize that God is present in all creation, then we begin to have a different relationship with that creation. I have tried to expand our view of incarnation through this sermon when we consider not only the particular event of Jesus' incarnation, but the goodness of incarnation or embodiment more generally.

When we consider the entire spectrum of physical existence, we discover that our entire universe is brimming with God's presence. Creation itself, from the smallest microbe to the largest star, is a place where God is happy to dwell.

And so when we recognize this, we begin to view ourselves as part of what God is doing in our physical reality today. And so I say all this because I want to leave you with a sense of wonder about incarnation, about what God is doing in our physical worlds today, in us, in others, in all creation, and how Jesus is a part of all of that.

I know that I have dealt with a lot of territory in this sermon kind of at a mile a minute, I mean, a mile a second pace, I guess I could say. So I want my final part of this sermon to be an illustration.

[25 : 31] And I can think of no better illustration than communion itself. In a few minutes, we are going to celebrate communion.

And as we do, I want you to consider the incarnate God. As we walk through the communion liturgy, I want you to consider the body and blood of Christ.

Consider the fact that God became a human being, that God inhabited the vulnerability in the particular experiences of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ was a place where God was happy to dwell, and God made his home among us.

Consider the body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ shed for you. And then, as we gather outside, I want you to consider your own body.

Consider all the ways that it has led you to this place right now. Consider how it has carried you from your existence as a zygote in your mother's womb to your infancy, to your childhood, your adolescence, your adulthood.

[26 : 53] And thank your body for what it has carried you through. But it has brought you here to this moment. Then, as we partake of the bread and the cup, I want you to consider others.

For those of us who are here in this room, we will gather in a circle. And as we do, I want you to look at each other and see each other for who they are.

Maybe catch the eye of a stranger, someone you don't know, and say hello to them after. But recognize that when we consume the elements, when we drink the wine and eat the bread, that we are in some ways connected through that moment.

That in the act of communion, we are becoming the body of Christ here on this earth together. And then, as you leave, consider all of creation.

Consider the grains that were crushed to make that bread. consider the grapes that were also crushed to make what, in this case, is grape juice. But we can pretend it's wine.

[28 : 13] And think about how the bread and the grapes are part of this glorious ecosystem of all creation.

And we ourselves are a part of that. That we are a part of what God is doing in our midst. And that is a reflection of the fact that God is present in all aspects of creation.

So, if you take nothing away, consider that meditation. that is this definition ■■■ ram to answerrust and then through you you you