

God gets particular

The incarnation doesn't only mean that God is with us. It means that God is with us as Jesus.

By [Jason Micheli](#)

December 29, 2016

This sweet baby Jesus in his golden-fleece diapers is God. In the flesh.

That was the basic gist of my Christmas Eve sermon, as it was, I'm sure, for most of my clergy colleagues.

Christmas Eve isn't the time for cute or clever surprises. Or at least I thought so. Apparently we had some visitors who had never heard that before, never heard of what the church calls the incarnation.

One was a young woman who came up to me at the end of the 9 p.m. service. She was about my age, I think. I'd never seen her before. She had a couple of kids running around at her legs.

She had this hectic sort of presence about her, like she hadn't been sure about coming to church that night and she was even less sure about approaching me.

She forgot to tell me her name. I forgot to ask. She just came right up to me, pushed her hair behind her ears, held out her hand and told me that her husband was in Iraq and that her mom was dying. That's how she identified herself.

I started to empathize with her, but she went on to tell me how none of them had ever really gone to church or been religious before—lots of people apologize like that at Christmas. Before I could really say anything in reply she asked me: **'Is God,'** she caught herself. **'Is God really like Jesus?'**

And I felt like saying: *'Lady, where were you for the last hour? Didn't you listen to a word of my sermon? Do you know how long I spent writing it?'*

But instead I said: **'Yes, they're one and the same.'**

And she smiled.

She smiled. She didn't say anything more about it. She didn't say anything else.

I can't read minds but my guess is she was thinking of her mom, her mom who was dying and who'd never gone to church. My guess is she liked the idea that the God who would meet her mom was as loving, merciful, and forgiving as Jesus is supposed to be.

'Merry Christmas,' I said.

She wasn't the only who came up to me that night. Another was an older man. He was dressed expensively and wore a black wool beret on his head. To tell the truth, he seemed kind of like a curmudgeon, and he was from out of town so, chances are, he belongs to somebody here.

He told me he was in banking. He said that he wasn't really a church person but that reading philosophy was his passion. He came up to me at the end of the 7 p.m. service, and he said: **'Reverend, that was an interesting message, but one thing wasn't clear to me. Were you saying Jesus leads to God, or that he is God?'**

I couldn't tell whether it was a condescension or a question.

'In the flesh,' I replied to him.

'Really?' he said, and his face suddenly looked irritated, worried.

He didn't say anything more and I can't read minds, but my guess is he was thinking that this baby Jesus was going to grow up. That one day this baby was going to say and do things, this baby was going to make demands and exert expectations that made him uncomfortable.

That if incarnation is the ante then he didn't want to get stuck with Jesus.

'Merry Christmas,' I said.

He 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.

Now Christmas is over on all but the liturgical calendar. Trees and decorations have been taken down. We've exchanged gifts and greetings and here we are again—stuck with Jesus.

That's what I couldn't say on Christmas Eve. It would've made a bad impression on all the bright-eyed visitors we had here. It would be better if they came back a few times before we let them know what they're getting into, before we let them know the baby in the manger grows up to be Jesus.

That's what [Paul's Christ hymn in Colossians](#) is driving at: that the whole meaning of incarnation, the shock and irritating specificity of incarnation, it isn't just that 'God is with us.' That sounds nice and comforting.

It's that God is with us *as Jesus*. The message of Christmas isn't that God came among us as a baby, that doesn't sound too demanding. No, the message of Christmas is that God came among us as the baby who grew up to be Jesus. Those are the uncomfortable claims we make. That in Jesus we've seen all of God there is to discover.

Now, even though I'm a minister, I can tell you that my life would be whole lot easier if God would just remain abstract and aloof. I could get on with my priorities more quickly if I could just say: *Well, Jesus, he only gives us a partial glimpse of God. Maybe I'll go get a second opinion.*

Things might be easier for us if it were otherwise but, at Christmas, in Jesus, God gets particular.

Jesus, we say, is a revelation of the real ways of God. Think about what that means.

Because of Christmas, when we have a decision or dilemma in our lives, we can no longer ask: 'I wonder what God wants me to do?'

Now, because of Christmas, we have to ask: 'What would Jesus do?' because Jesus is *the image of the invisible God*.

We're stuck with Jesus.

When someone wrongs us or hurts us, we've got to forgive them not just once but over and over again because Jesus said so and *in Jesus all things hold together*.

When someone asks for our help and we don't want to, we don't have the time or we doubt the sincerity of the request, not only do we have to help we've got to go farther than they've even asked because that's what Jesus said to do, and *through him all things in heaven and on earth were created.*

When the world tempts us into thinking about issues or people in black and white terms we've got to put ourselves in other shoes because Jesus told us to and *he is the firstborn of creation.*

That's what I couldn't say at Christmas.

I couldn't say:

Watch Out

Caution

Buyer Beware

Don't get too close to the manger

Don't be fooled by his smile or his sweet eyes because this is one difficult, demanding baby

I couldn't ask:

Do you have anger against someone you love?

Have you sinned against a neighbor?

Are there people who are just too unsavory for you to spend time with them?

Because you may want to think twice before saying *Merry Christmas*, because this baby's going to have a few things to say when he grows up and I'm sorry but you're going to have to listen.

After all, *in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*

In other words, we Christians say: It's not that Jesus is someone who speaks of God. It's that Jesus is what God speaks to us. It's not that Jesus is someone who

teaches about God. It's that Jesus is what God teaches us. It's not that Jesus is one who shows us a way to God. It's that Jesus embodies the ways of God. Completely.

You can search under every star in the sky but the totality of God's truth and beauty and splendor is to be found in this particular Jew from Nazareth, in his life from cradle to cross.

You see, there's an unavoidable, uncompromising finality to Jesus that Paul wants to hit you over the head with in his hymn.

For Paul, when it comes to Christ, you can choose not to follow. You can refuse to bend your life to his life. But you can't say that in Jesus we find anything less than the fullness of God.

Dr. Phil's relationship advice might seem more practical to us. The Dalai Lama might seem less threatening to us. Political pundits might make more sense to us. But to welcome the baby at Bethlehem is to find yourself stuck with Jesus.

On Christmas Eve, I tried to keep things simple and straightforward. I tried to be clear, but some people still had questions.

A man came up to me at the end of the 11 p.m. service. The 11 p.m. crowd is always kind of a motley crew; you never know who's going to show up that late at night.

This man was old. I'd seen him go through the communion line, and, judging from his uncertainty about how to receive the sacrament, I'd guess he'd not been to church much before.

He came up to me by the altar steps and shook my hand. And, with sincerity, he said: **'I enjoyed your talk. Now were you saying Jesus and God are the same person?'**

And I felt like saying: *'How much clearer can I be? I must have said it a dozen times. Do you people need me to draw pictures?'*

But instead I said: 'Yes.'

And I saw the recognition pass across the man's face.

He said: 'Then that means that everything Jesus said and did...'

His voice trailed off.

He didn't say anything more, and I couldn't read his mind. But my guess is I could've finished his sentence for him...

If Jesus and God are one and the same, then that means that everything Jesus said and did, that's the fullness of God.

And to try to live his life—even though it's difficult and demanding, even though we can't do it perfectly—to try living his life that's what it means to be fully alive.

Judging from the look on his face, my guess is I could have finished his sentence.

But instead I said: 'Merry Christmas.'

Originally posted at [Tamed Cynic](#)