

Time of Grace Ministry
He Was Made In Human Likeness
Philippians 2:5-7
December 27, 2015

When I say, “Do you find the Christmas story believable?” I don’t mean that you can’t believe God’s word; of course we can. What I mean is if you were scripting this yourself, if you were coming up with your own design, how is God going to fight Satan? How is the epic battle between good and evil going to get fought out? You would never set the plan in motion by having God become a helpless, human infant. That would never occur to you and would most certainly never occur to me, either. But that’s exactly what God did.

Isn’t that amazing? God in his greatness laid aside his power, his worship, and his authority and instead of being worshipped and adored by angels, came to this earth basically to be ignored and even disregarded and hated and ultimately killed. Jesus came to fight Satan not blasting power as God himself might have done, issuing mighty thunder bolts from his powerful mouth. Instead he came to become incarnate; came to become a human being to fight Satan as us, like us, and as one of us. Astounding!

And Christmas is the first installment of that mighty plan through the incarnation to bring forgiveness of sins to you and me. He was going to fight Satan on our terms as a human being and in this way win forgiveness for all of us. Let’s dig into God’s wonderful word and celebrate how he came in human likeness.

Are you a fan of the actor Eddie Murphy? Some of you may be; some of you may not. I maybe know why – on my new car that I have, a year and a half ago it had one year’s worth of Sirius radio and I could listen to the comedy channel and when I’d hear his nightclub bits – whew, pretty brutal! I couldn’t last very long because the air was absolutely blue with profanity and crudity and everything. But his movies were pretty clean, mostly. And I’ve got to tell you about a really a good one.

If you’re ever in a hurry, you know you want to watch a movie, and you absolutely do not have time to waste on a clinker and you want a surefire one, I can heartily endorse one that he did with Dan Aykroyd. It’s called “Trading Places.” I wonder if anybody ever saw it? I’ll give you a little bit of the plot but not enough to spoil it for you.

Eddie Murphy is a street hustler. He’s panhandling and conning people out on the street. You know, keeping it real, just a hustle to survive, just trying to stay alive one day at a time. Dan Aykroyd is this young guy, he’s engaged, he’s got this beautiful, wealthy fiancé. He’s on his way up in life as a commodities trader. He’s got a job at a great firm, Duke & Duke. He’s on his way up, he’s in control of his world, he smirks, he’s self-confident, everything’s coming together for him, he’s smart, and unfortunately, his two bosses are some two really heartless jerks. And they get into an argument over the way people perform: Is it based on their innate talent? Or is it all about your environment? You know, the old nature verses nurture argument that psychologists have been arguing about for a century or longer.

And they can't decide so they do what they always do, which is to make a bet and to have an experiment. So they made their bet – I won't tell you what it is they wagered with each other; that's part of the spoiler alert – I'll just say they had a wager. And so what they decided to do was use Dan Aykroyd's character as part of their bait and they cut off all his credit, figured out a way to deny him absolutely even one dollar of income to see what he would do if all of his outward props and structure were cut away and so that his fiancé wouldn't bail him out, they arranged with some prostitute to embarrass him publically when she was around and in this way, get his fiancé to dump him also. So he's got nothing now; he's got absolutely nothing.

Simultaneously, they pitch a job to Eddie Murphy, lift him off the street, clean him up, put a two thousand dollar suit on him, and see if he can function in their world and learn commodities trading.

Well, Eddie kind of liked the gig; Dan did not. They traded places but it was absolutely involuntary. Dan Aykroyd did not want to do this; this was done without his consent or knowledge. He was abused into it. They traded places forcibly as a cruel stunt and I'll say this also without giving you a spoiler or too much information – eventually, Aykroyd and Murphy figure out what's going on and they find an exquisite form of revenge on these two brothers.

But it leads me to ponder with you the idea of trading places; that someone who's on the way up who's got it all trades places with somebody who's basically living from day-to-day, has zero net assets, and can only stay alive by his wits and how they traded places. And I put before you today the astonishing concept that our Lord Jesus did nothing less than that for you because he has chosen to love you that much.

I'm not sure I even feel worthy to preach a sermon about the astonishing miracle of the incarnation because it's beyond human language. I'm not sure that anybody, any human being, could ever do justice to this astonishing story. And basically, I don't want to do a lot of interpretation and over-explaining, I just want to stand with you at the manger just for a few minutes, stand there with all of us, and just go, "Wow. Just wow." The implausibility of it, the ironies, rich ironies abound, the paradoxes and seeming conflicts are more than we could number. That the infinite God became finite. The God who knew no limits, who could move faster than the speed of light, who invented the speed of light, would have to walk one slow step at a time to get to his next meal. The God who never sleeps who now needed to sleep. The God who feeds the universe now needed to nurse or die. He became mortal, he who was immortal, to give us mortals immortality. I could go on and on and on. It's just – this is a wow moment.

And what I'd like to do with you is just savor some of the most exalted, lofty, poetry about the incarnation in all of Scripture and let St. Paul's amazing words simply inspire our hearts. And if you would turn with me to the book of Philippians in chapter two, we're going to read together just a little bit of Paul's poem. It's like he couldn't be contained anymore in prose. It's sort of like when Mary heard about this amazing news – prose, she just blew through it – and her words became poetic lines. Her words of joy being chosen to be the vehicle for salvation for the world made her erupt into a poetic utterance. Zechariah, too, did the same thing. And Paul here, as he started thinking about the incarnation, just erupts into lines that I hope you know by heart already or dig out your Bible and read it with me or at least just listen and let's savor these together just for the wow factor.

But notice how the poem begins: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,” chapter two verse five. Now think about that and hold that in the back of your head because I’m going to come back to that. But that’s how the poem starts: “Be like Jesus: Who, being in very nature God.” You may have a footnote that says “or in the form of God,” and that’s actually much closer. Being in God’s format, the way God has formatted, meaning unlimited, all-powerful, eternal in not only into the future but also deeply all the way back into the past. He was in existence before there even was a past. Everything is all the present for God and he moves back and forth between time as though it’s happening one thing at a time like us or all things happening all at the same time. He’s able to track all of that.

And this is what Christ enjoyed and experienced as the Son of God in heaven: Adoration of the angels, ten thousand times ten thousand people, as his executive staff leaping with the drum beat of their wings to do his bidding when he would utter the word or just give it the thought and he left all of that behind. Though he was in very nature fully God, one hundred percent fully divine, he did not consider his equality with God something to be grasped or held onto for selfish purposes. It would have been a lot more comfortable to stay in the “morphe” – as the Greeks say, the very nature of God, or the very form or substance of God – that would have been more comfortable. But instead he didn’t grasp or hang onto it; he let go of it. Not because it was pried out of his clutching grasp but because he voluntarily let go of it at the invitation – not the command – but the invitation of his Father and freely chose life down here in the pit with us instead of the adoration in front of the sapphire and emerald throne and sky and glassy floor of the heavenly throne.

It’s sort of like he’s standing at the top of a well where the human race has fallen into and looking at us down in the pit with slippery, muddy sides that we cannot possibly climb out of. He looked down from where it was dry and sunny, looked down to the dark hole down there where everybody’s scrambling and clawing trying to survive, attacking and hurting each other, stealing from each other, ripping each other off, trying to climb on top of others to try and get a little bit higher. And he looked down and instead of just yelling at us or hating on us for being such idiots, he said, “Get a rope and lower me down there. Somebody has to help those people and I’m willing to go myself.” And they lowered him down and then pulled the rope back up and he was stuck down there, in the pit, as he came here not just to visit – he wasn’t a tourist on earth. He came to live with us as us. I don’t want to get into explaining that or whatever – just gawk at it with me. Just say, “Wow! Wow!” The most amazing thing that had happened in human history up until that moment.

Instead of grasping at his equality and clinging to his power and worship and adoration, he let go of it, didn’t strip himself of the ability, but he gave up the use of it. Once in a great while his Father said, “Now would be a good time to do a miracle.” And it would burst out of his body and then he’d shut it right down again. Most of the time he lived small.

Verse seven says: “He made himself nothing.” The Greek word says literally “he emptied himself” of all of his glory and splendor and he looked like nothing more than one of us. And he didn’t live like a king; he lived like what he was. Growing up in his step-father’s carpenter shop, probably learned how to do woodworking and make himself useful while he waited for the signal

to begin his public ministry. He looked so ordinary, nobody else in Nazareth even figured out who he was. And in fact, even his step-brothers or his half-brothers – that’s a better word than step-brother – even his half-brothers and his sisters did not believe in him when they were growing up. He was just their slightly strange big brother. Only his mom and step-father really had a clue who he was and he kept it dialed so down, nobody knew. They never had much, grew up poor, and then during his three years of ministry, he was a traveling rabbi with no reliable source of income, no paying steady job, basically not knowing for sure where he was going to sleep the next night or what he was going to eat. That low he made himself. In fact, he made himself nothing; depending on others to live.

The God who fed the world had to nurse at his mother just like you and me. Amazing! The God who fills the universe had, as a baby, to be carried to get from point A to point B; had to learn how to walk like you and me, falling down more than we actually successfully walked at first, just like you and me. Had to learn how to talk. Had to go to school to learn how to write his letters. Had to go to synagogue school to learn about the Bible just like you and me. And you might say, “That’s insane. God knows everything!” I’m just going to say yes, you’re right. Isn’t that a paradox? We will never resolve how you can be ignorant and brilliant simultaneously. How you can know everything but need to learn everything simultaneously. Don’t try to unravel that; just say wow.

He emptied himself. Made himself nothing. He took the morphe – the form, or my NIV says “the nature – of a servant. Again, another word where there’s some flavors. The Greek word *doulas* actually means “a slave.” In other words, restricted his independence of thought and action to bend it toward someone else’s will. He obeyed his step-father. He obeyed his mamma. She bossed him around when he was a kid just like your mamma bossed you around. Isn’t that a kick in the head? He let a sinful human being tell him what to do. His synagogue instructors, his rabbis and the Levites, told him what to do. They gave him his memory work and his assignments, just as your Sunday School teachers helped you and told you what to do and made you stand up and sit down when they wanted. He obeyed the laws of his town of Nazareth where he lived. He obeyed the Roman legions who had authority over him as he was growing up and obeyed all the laws of his father, like a slave who did not have an independent will or freedom of action on his own. He did all that – not just for the fun of it, not like the Duke brothers as a bet like I’m going to bet you, father, that I can pull this off, this was not a game. This was not a challenge like some kind of a reality TV show where, “Alright now, the three members of the Holy Trinity are going to take the ultimate challenge: Can you pull this off? Go be a human being for thirty-three years, don’t sin. Let’s see if Jesus, the Son, can do it. Okay, cameras are rolling.” This is not prank television; this was life or death. Imagine what if he had messed up? He was taking a fearful risk. This was a high wire act where he is wrestling with Satan. He’s not only down there to save us, he’s wrestling with Satan in the mud like us, with us, as us. What can you say but wow? Just wow.

So he takes on the form of a slave where he had yielded his own independence of action and let somebody else tell him what to do. “He was made in human likeness.” And here, not likeness in the sense of a representation, likeness is – we’re trying to get the Greek language into English and there’s some speed bumps along the way. The way we use likeness might give you the wrong idea. Like if, let’s say your family commissions a painting of you and they have this big

unveiling and it's a birthday surprise and I come to look at the painting of you and I say, "What a great likeness!" It's not you; it's like you, it's a picture of you, it's a representation of you, but it's not you." Jesus didn't come just to be a holographic projection of you. He's not here as an avatar or a digital human being or he's not something God the Father kind of made up like a sort of a stunt or like a bot or something like that. He is a real human being, which is why he – actually, when he was born, he'd been around for nine months already. Same as you and me, riding in that wet little cave called his mother's womb where already as a tiny, fertilized egg that tiny little thing turning into a peanut, which turned into a preborn baby, was the way that he really entered our planet to have the full human experience of everything you and I must go through. So that when he would give his obedience, it could fully be as God and a human being, a perfect substitute for you. You and I and Jesus trade places.

He takes our place and keeps all the laws for us and then gives all of us his report card, which he can do because his divinity makes him universal but his humanity makes it real. What can you say but wow? "He was made in human likeness." Not a photograph, not a computer simulation. He was made a human being just like us so that we could trade places. He could come down into our mud pit and he could lift us out up to the sunshine to his heavenly home. What can you say but wow?

I leave you with just one thought and that's how it began. God tells you these things for you to believe and to be encouraged so that you may live your life with joy and without any fear whatsoever so that you may die with a smile on your face knowing you're as immortal as Christ. Meaning, you're just about ready to be hauled out of the pit. In fact, the irony is it's by being planted in the ground in your grave that you actually take a big step forward to the moment of leaping out of the earth. But he tells you this also so that you know how to act while you're here.

Now let's go all the way back to how this poem begins. Verse six, where the poem begins, is not the beginning of the sentence. The sentence begins: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." He did all these things not as a stunt, not to show off, not for the fun of it, not for the challenge, but to give you and me a gift because he loves us that much. And now asks nothing less of you than to have that same mind within you, that you would love each other just as much.

An Anglican priest, roughly during the time of the American Civil War, took a trip to Rome with his wife and there converted to Catholicism. His name was Edward Caswell and to the great dismay of his bishop when he came back, he came back a Catholic and was ordained into the Catholic Church. His wife then died and made it possible that he could be ordained as a priest and start serving as a priest because now he was single again and could be celibate again as Roman Catholic priests are expected to be. And he was gifted with poetry. He translated some of the great Latin hymns that otherwise would have been lost. Nobody he knew – fewer and fewer people spoke Latin.

But he wrote one of his own and Edward Caswell, in the middle 1800s, wrote a beautiful hymn on the impact of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and it ties in with how this verse begins and here's how his last verse of his beautiful hymn goes: "Teach, oh teach us holy child, by your birth so meek and mild. Teach us to resemble thee in thy sweet humility."

Let's come before our Lord at this Christmastime and give him some thanks and some worship.

Father, your gift is magnificent. The best gift the world has ever received was the gift of your Son, wrapped up in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. How low he had to go to carry out your mission. Lord Jesus, how generous your spirit, how kind and loving your heart, to make yourself so small to make us bigger.

Thank you for coming to our world, for taking on human flesh, and being made in human likeness so that we might be declared holy with your divine holiness. You are truly the most magnificent present we've ever received. It gives us joy to worship you and give you our gifts.

Holy Spirit, help us believe it and share that good news for the rest of our lives. We eagerly look forward to thanking you in person. Hear our prayers for we say them in Jesus' name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske wishing all of you a very merry Christmas.

