

Rev. David Strain
December 24, 2009 – PM

Christ the Servant, Savior, Sovereign
Philippians 2:5-11

Welcome to Main Street Presbyterian Church and a very Merry Christmas to you all. Now before we begin, let me explain that the Bible nowhere *commands* the commemoration of Christ's birth. In the New Testament there is only *one* holy day and that is Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. The idea that it is a *necessary* part of Christian devotion to remember the birth of Jesus on the 25th of December is a duty the Bible nowhere lays on our consciences. Nevertheless, in our culture, Christmas has this association with the birth of Christ. People are more inclined to attend church during this season than at others, and so here at Main Street Presbyterian Church we want to take this opportunity to show hospitality to our community and welcome you to our little church, to meditate together on the significance of the coming of Christ, and to proclaim to you the good news that in Christ there is salvation for everyone who believes.

And to help us do that together, we are going to turn our attention to Philippians 2:5-11, where we find one place in the Bible where we have a short but incredibly profound summary of the significance of the coming of Jesus Christ

In fine dining, an aperitif is offered to cleanse the palate in advance of the meal. I think that our Christmases can sometimes be a bit like glutting our appetites on chocolate. The sentimentality of it all, the decorations, the favorite movies and songs and so on... they are all a lot of fun, aren't they? But like guzzling our way through a box of chocolates, it can rather spoil our appetite and dull our palate when it comes to the truly nourishing meal. We need an aperitif to cleanse our spiritual palates a little.

That is what Philippians 2:5-11 is. It is a tonic that resensitizes us to the truly satisfying message that rather tends to lie buried beneath all that we have made Christmas into. So would you look at the passage with me, please?

And there are two things to notice up front by way of introduction. First of all, this is a *song*. In some Bible versions, verses 6-11 are actually written in verse, to demonstrate their poetic structure. They bear the features of a hymn and many

scholars have wondered if these may, in fact, be fragments of a song commonly used in the worship of the church at Philippi, picked up and utilized by Paul here to make his point. Others wonder if perhaps Paul himself wrote them as a hymn of praise and includes them for the encouragement of the believers there.

Whatever their precise prehistory, the poetic form, the hymn-like structure here is *deeply appropriate*. When you look at the announcements of the coming of Jesus Christ in the gospels, what you will discover is that they are *full of singing*. The angels sing. Mary sings. Zechariah sings. Simeon sings. Elizabeth sings. Whenever scripture speaks about the coming of Christ, it would seem that it regularly bursts into song. Whatever else we are to make of the message of these verses of Philippians, therefore, they ought to make us rejoice and sing praise.

Secondly, notice that Paul cannot bring himself simply to talk about the meaning of *the coming of Christ*. He is compelled to place the coming of Christ *into the context of the whole story* of the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ; which is to say that *we cannot isolate the “Christmas” message from the “Easter” message. We cannot divorce the cradle from the Cross or the empty tomb. Death, resurrection, and ascension, along with virginal conception and birth, are part of a single story and it all needs to be told together. To understand Christ’s coming, we must also understand His dying, rising, and ruling.*

So with all that said, what do we learn here about the coming of Jesus Christ? One way of unpacking these verses is to notice *three couplets*. Would you look at the text, please? First, there are two *natures* here, then there are two *Adams*, and finally there are two *directions*.

First of all, there are *two natures*. When we ask the question “who *is* the Baby of Bethlehem?”, this passage leaves us in no doubt: this child is *both* God *and* man. He has *two natures*. *We* only have one. We are *human*. That is our nature. But Jesus has *two*. He is God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever.

First, the passage tells us He is God. Look at verse 6, please. Jesus is, we are told, “in the form of God.” The word “form” there is the Greek word “morphe,” we get our words *metamorphosis* and *morphology* from it. The “morphology of a word”

is the study of the *form* of the word, how it is put together to convey the meaning that it does. Paul is tracing out in a sense the morphology of Christ.

And what he says is, literally, that Christ Jesus is in *morphe*, God. He does not say that He was in the form *of* God. He says He *is*, in form, *God*. We think of form as the opposite of substance, don't we? We even talk that way—a politician's speech, we might say was all "form and no substance." So we tend think that "form" means surface appearance but not inner reality. But that is not what *Paul* means by the word here. He isn't saying Jesus looked like God but wasn't really. He is saying that the dimensions and the shape of God, the contours of the godness of God, belong entirely to Him. That which is recognizably God is recognizably Christ's.

And then he says that this Christ "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." That's a cumbersome translation. Paul uses a word there that has the sense of clinging onto something, grasping at it as though afraid it might be lost. Jesus, Paul is saying, is not like a little child being dropped off outside the school gate for the first time, clutching at his father's hand in fear he might get lost. There is no insecurity in Christ. He is not *slightly* God. His deity is not something *additional to Him* that may be lost or taken away without damaging His essential self. God is who He is. His equality with God is not something He feared losing. But rather, in the utter confidence and security of His own unity and equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the fellowship of glorious Trinity, Jesus did something astounding. Jesus, the one who *is by nature God the Son, became a man*.

Our passage articulates that amazing event like this, "He made Himself of no reputation taking the form of a servant and coming in the likeness of men and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself."

God became man in Jesus Christ. Verse 7 says He did so by making Himself "of no reputation." And here again our translation is a little clunky. What Paul said literally is that "He emptied Himself." When Mary conceived and bore a son in the manger 2000 years ago, God was emptying Himself. But *how* did He empty Himself? What does that *mean* exactly? Does it mean that in becoming a man He somehow ceased to be God? In order to come as the baby of Bethlehem did God step down from the throne of glory? Did Jesus empty Himself of His deity?

Look at the text. Paul explains the *way* He emptied Himself. It was by *taking the form of a servant*, using the same word here that he used a moment ago to describe His *deity*—form—the *morphe*—of a servant. The one who is in *morphe*, *God*, takes the *morphe* of *a servant*. To the features of deity were added the features of servitude. The self-abnegation involved for God in becoming man did not include *divesting Himself of deity* but in *adding humanity*. This is *subtraction* by *addition*. Jesus emptied Himself without setting aside anything that made Him *God*, but by *adding* what makes Him *man*.

He takes a servant form, and comes in the likeness of men. *Jesus has two distinct natures*. He is God and man. He is the God-man. Now as mind boggling as it may seem, that truth is vital—and for *this* reason: Only an eternal God could satisfy an eternal debt. That, you see, is our predicament. We are all stuck deep in debt to God. We *owe* Him obedience but *we cannot obey*. We owe Him *recompense* for our disobedience but we cannot *pay*. Sin is an offense with *eternal* consequences. We owe an *eternal* debt. If we are to be delivered from the condemnation we deserve, it can only be the *eternal God Himself* who rescues us. And so Jesus is God-come-down.

But only a man may legitimately atone for *human* sin. In order for Jesus to qualify as our substitute and pay the debt *we* could not pay, He must truly represent *us*. He had to be *one of us*. And so Jesus was not only God *but also man*. Wesley captures the point brilliantly when he makes us sing, “Hark the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King; peace on earth and mercy mild, *God and sinners reconciled!*’...Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity, pleased as man with man to dwell Jesus our Emmanuel.”

Then *secondly*, there are not only *two natures* in this passage, there are also *two Adams* in the passage, or perhaps it is better to say that Paul alludes to a contrast between two Adams here.

Look at our text again. If you will recall the Genesis account for a moment, the *first* Adam was made in the image and likeness of God, yet he *did* consider equality with God something to be grasped after and clutched at. When Satan came to him to

tempt him, to make his temptation to disobedience the more alluring, he whispered, “***You shall be like God.***” But ***Jesus***, the eternal Son, who is the very *morphe*, the form of God, did ***not*** consider equality with God something to be grasped at and came as a man, as a ***second*** Adam.

The ***first*** Adam was called upon to serve the Lord in Eden, which, of course, he failed to do, but gave himself over to serving himself instead. But, in language redolent of Isaiah 53, the famous prophecy of the coming Servant of the Lord who would die to atone for His people’s sin, ***Jesus***, the ***second*** Adam, came as a man, taking the form of a servant to perfectly obey the Lord.

The ***first*** Adam ***disobeyed***. He was told by the serpent that his disobedience to God’s law would not end in death but rather be a short cut to a new fullness of life. But when he disobeyed God, sin entered the world and along with sin came death, which is what Paul tells us in an extended discussion in Romans 5, in the course of which he compares Jesus and Adam. Adam ***disobeyed***, and sin and death reigned. Jesus came as a ***second and last Adam*** and He ***obeyed***. And ***His*** obedience ***was*** an obedience **unto death**, even the death of a cross.

Why was Jesus born? He was born to be a ***new Adam***. Since the first Adam sinned, we have all lived with sin and misery. The world is broken. Our relationships with God and with one another are broken. Our communication is broken. ***We*** are broken! Jesus was born of the virgin to rewrite Adam’s story, to compose a new, alternative history for humanity. He came to ***obey*** where our first father ***disobeyed***. And His obedience ***was*** **unto death on a cross**. Adam’s obedience would have issued in ***life***. Christ’s obedience **demanded His death**. Why? He had to obey unto death, because the law demanded payment for Adam’s sin, and your sin, and the sin of the race ever since.

When we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are celebrating the intervention of God in the history of the outworking of Adam’s rebellion in the lives of all his descendants. When God became man and was born of Mary, He came to be a ***second*** Adam, the origin and founder of a ***new humanity***, one in which the guilt of sin would be removed and the pollution and stain of sin increasingly cleansed. ***That*** is what He came to get done.

So there are two *natures* here and two *Adams* here. Finally there are two *directions*.

Notice the down-up structure of the passage before us. In verse 6 Christ is the one who has existed forever in the *morphe*, the form of God. He is *divine*. But in verses 7 a downward trajectory begins. First, He comes down into *servitude*, in likeness as a man. He becomes *human*. He empties Himself by taking the humble status of humanity to Himself. He was born to an obscure and rather poor family, in an equally obscure town, in an unknown backwater of the Roman Empire. Along with His parents, He was for a time a refugee in Egypt, seeking asylum from the political brutality of the totalitarian government back home. He grew up to be a wandering rabbi without a home to call His own.

Then verse 8 carries *on* the downward spiral. Having become a man, He humbled Himself still further and became *obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross*. Down from glory to the weakness and pain of humanity; down even from there, to a lowly position among His peers; down from there again to take the posture of a servant, and from there, when it does not look like there is anywhere lower to go, *He is tortured and disfigured, crucified, dead and buried*. Down all the way into *death*, all the way into the *grave* went the one who is in form God!

But then at the bottom of that downward spiral, comes an upward movement. Death does not hold Him. Verse 9, “Therefore God also highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and of those on earth and of those under the earth and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Because He went *down* into humanity, *down* into servitude, *down* into death, *down* into the grave, because of *the cross*, where sin was paid for and salvation secured for sinners, *God exalted Him*. *Up* He rose in victory. And *up* He went to glory once more. And *up* with Him went His humanity. The *morphe* of God, who came down to assume the *morphe* of a servant, who became a man, He ascended once again to the glory of heaven’s throne, the glory He had with the Father before

the world was, and with Him went that humanity that was now essential to His person. ***Because of the first Christmas, now sitting at the right hand of the Father, ruler over all creation, Sovereign over history, King of kings and Lord of lords, given the name over every name, is glorified humanity!***

And because that is so, a great confession will one day be made. Every knee will bow one day and every tongue confess His Lordship. Interestingly, verse 5 and verse 11 bracket this whole wonderful Philippian hymn with parallel statements calling for ***response***. Verse 5 calls for a response ***here and now***. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” Verse 11 indicates that there will be a response from everyone ***hereafter***.

Verse 5 holds out the possibility, you see, of responding ***here***, in faith, to Christ who bore our sins, entered our humanity, endured our curse, secured our pardon and rose in victory to blaze the trail for our own destinies. It offers us the possibility of partaking of the transforming power of Christ’s redeeming work for us ***now***.

Verse 11, however, tells us that, whether we embrace Christ now or not, we ***will*** see the truth ***one day***. For those who embrace Him ***here***, the day when our knees buckle and our tongues confess Him Lord, the last Day, the great day of public judgment, will be a day of great joy and celebration. ***But for those who do not embrace Christ by faith alone, that day will be a terrible shock***. Your knees will buckle and your tongues confess, ***but your confession will be filled with shame and horror and dread as you realize on that day what you have denied today***. You will see then that you were wrong to play with religion. You were wrong to keep Christ at arm’s length. You were wrong to dismiss the claims of Christ. And your confession of His Lordship will be the last thing you do before He dismisses you to the outer-darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth forever.

To those who reject Christ, verse 11 ***is a picture of hell’s beginning***. To those who embrace Him, ***it is heaven’s dawn***.

The pressing question for you this Christmas Eve is ***not*** how you will manage to pull off Christmas dinner tomorrow. It is not whether you’ll get what you hoped

for as a gift. *It is what will you do with Jesus Christ?* Consider what He has done. Consider *the two natures* of Christ, *the two Adams* and *the two directions* He took for you. Will you come to Him and rest your faith in Him this Christmas, or will you carry on keeping Christ at bay? Will verse 11 be *heaven's dawn or hell's beginning* for you? You can determine which it will be *tonight*.

If you'd like to talk to someone about the things you've heard tonight, please take a contact card, like this one, which you will find along with an information brochure in your pew, fill it out and hand it to the ushers or myself before you leave, and we will be glad to respond to your questions.

Before we conclude, however, will you bow your heads with me as we pray?