Christmas Eve 2021 Veiled in Flesh

I speak to you in the name of the incarnate God, Jesus. Amen.

In a pre-covid world, a man named David was at a public-school reunion. It was a Christmas party. David had become a teacher because he was inspired by his former 3rd grade teacher. He told the teacher, Mr. McDonald, why he had inspired him. One day, David had stolen the watch of one of his classmates. It was a birthday present and the little boy was very upset. The teacher Mr. McDonald asked the class to line up and close their eyes. The watch had to be returned. Mr. McDonald went from pocket to pocket until he came to David’s pocket and pulled the watch out. Mr. McDonald kept on checking pockets to the end of the line so no one would know who had stolen the watch. And then the children were told they could open their eyes. David said, “Mr. McDonald. You never said that I was the thief. You saved my soul that day and that is why I was inspired to become a teacher.”

Mr. McDonald looked surprised and told David that he did not remember him at all. David was shocked and wondered how Mr. McDonald could have forgotten that he pulled the watch out of David’s pocket. Mr. McDonald then said, “Ah. As I moved from pocket to pocket my eyes were closed too.”

*Author unknown*

That teacher had the light of God within him.

I then continue the sermon by putting a veil over my head. And I ask the congregation and the live stream if they know what is under the veil. And of course they will say, YES! Would they know it was me if they had not seen me put it on?

I am the Chaplain for the Thunder Bay Police and I was in the police station last week about to attend a 7 am briefing and an officer walked by me. I thought I knew who the person was but the officer was wearing a mask. In other words, he was covered in a mask. He was veiled in a mask. He started to speak with me and immediately mask or no mask I knew who it was. I recognized his voice.

I have a gift here that is wrapped up. I SHOW A WRAPPED GIFT. This present is veiled in wrapping paper. Can you guess what is inside it? Probably not. One of the reasons why children love Christmas so much is because the gifts are wrapped, they are veiled, and the children long to know what is inside of them. What would thrill me as a child was to gaze up in the closet of my parents and see all sorts of wrapped gifts carefully stored for Christmas. It was the unveiling on Christmas that was wonderful.

Many things are veiled and hidden from us. Almonds are often veiled in chocolate. Kinder surprises for children are also veiled in chocolate. Books are veiled in covers. Our bodies are veiled in clothing. Gifts are veiled in wrapping paper.

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai after speaking with God, he had to wear a veil, a face covering as he was shining with the light of God, with the Shekinah. His face was dazzling and the people were terrified to come near him. So Moses veiled his face when he came down from the mountain. (Exodus 34)

The apostle Paul wrote this in his 2nd letter to the Christians in Corinth:

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.” 2 Corinthians 4:3

What Paul is saying is that people do not see the good news of Christmas, the good news of the incarnation unless they have some experience of the presence of Christ.

When something is veiled, it means that it is covered and without some knowledge or someone pointing us towards the truth, we may not know what is behind the veil.

The hymn *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* composed by Charles Wesley nearly 300 years ago in England is one of our most beloved Christmas carols. Wesley includes the essence of the Christmas story, of Christianity in this carol.

It a whole Christian story and here are some of the nuggets of our faith in the carol:

* *Born that we no more may die, born to give us second birth*
* *the everlasting Lord*
* *light and life to all he brings*

Charles Wesley was the youngest of 18 children and he wrote over 3000 hymns such is *Love Divine All Loves Excelling* and *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*. He is known as one of the greatest hymn writers in history. His hymns show his devotion to careful Bible study. After Wesley wrote the Christmas carol, it was published by his old friend George Whitefield. Whitefield was a priest and he had a liberal interpretation of scripture which would have been unacceptable in the 1700’s. Whitefield changed the first line of Wesley’s hymn from:

*Hark! How all the welkin rings* Welkin was an old word for the vault of heaven.

TO

*Hark! The herald angels sing*

Wesley was infuriated as in the Bible the angels appearing to the shepherds never sang. The biblical record in Luke chapter 2 states that the angels only spoke. Today most people believe that the angels appearing in Luke 2 to the shepherds were singing angels. But they were not. As long as he lived, Wesley refused to sing the new first line that quickly gained popularity.

Today it is one of the most recognized carols in the world. It began with a misquoted verse of scripture but it still contains beautiful spiritual truths.

The message of Christmas, the entire message, the most important message is found in verse 2:

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see*

Let’s unpack this phrase. *Veiled in flesh.* God was veiled, God was covered by skin. We saw God inside of this human person Jesus.

*The Godhead see.* The Godhead refers to God.

The truth of the Christian message is that Jesus is God. God came to earth to take on the form of a vulnerable and helpless newborn, a child born not into privilege but to working class parents from the town of Nazareth. God came to us so that we could understand the love of God and develop a personal relationship with him.

We call this wonder the INCARNATION. Wesley goes on to say:

*Hail, the incarnate deity.* Meaning God has flesh. Jesus is God.

That is why so many people then and so many people today do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus as the incarnation of God here on earth. We look at the world through our own filters and we don’t see the truth in front of our eyes. We don’t see beyond the veil.

What can confuse us is that we refer to Jesus as the SON OF GOD. This phrase does not mean that Jesus is the offspring of God. This phrase does not mean that Jesus was created by God or inferior to God or coming from God or made by God. SON OF GOD is a ancient phrase that shows the divinity of Jesus. Jesus is God come down to earth. Jesus was also completely human. Jesus was not half God and half human. He was fully God and he was fully human. That reality is the true meaning of Christmas. That is why we have 2 candles on the altar to reinforce the Christian message that Jesus was fully God and fully human.

The ancient Nicene Creed from 325 AD stresses this and how many times have we said it or memorized it?

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father….. begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.* (From the Nicene Creed)

When we recite the Nicene Creed, does it lead to faith? Does it lead to trust? Does it lead to our true understanding that God came to earth veiled in flesh?

The message of Christmas is that Jesus was with God from the beginning of time, even before creation. Jesus was not created. He has always been with us.

God loves us so much that he decided to take on the form of a human person.

Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, was born with Mary as his mother. Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man which stresses his humanity.

Son of God and Son of Man woven together in the mystery of the incarnation.

And where is God today? Where is the presence of God veiled? What is the veil?

There is a wisdom story of a king who wished for absolute power above all. He was competing with God whom the people loved and put above the king. So the king decided to hide the people’s God so that he would vanish from their lives. He thought if I hide God on top of a mountain, everyone will go to the mountaintop to search for God. If I hide God at the bottom of the ocean, everyone will try to locate God and probe the ocean’s depths. And then the King had a brilliant idea. *I will hide God in the hearts of people. All kinds of people. Ordinary people. In their everyday lives. And no one will ever think of looking for God there. God will be hidden.*

God lives within the hearts of the believers.

In the 1300s, Julian of Norwich wrote a book called Revelations of Divine Love in which she explored the visions she had received when she was very ill. She refers to God as both our Father and our Mother. Christ’s greatest delight is to live hidden within our hearts.

Two hundred years later, another medieval mystic, Teresa of Avila, wrote about Christ sitting on a throne inside of our hearts. Hidden in our hearts and veiled in flesh.

We know that Christ is our Emmanuel. God is with us all the time.

May the wonder of the Christmas story touch your hearts in a special way this holy evening. May the veil be lifted so we see and believe in the reality of the incarnation.

***Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see.***

Merry Christmas!