

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Philippians 2:1-18
“Downwardly Mobile By Choice”
(2nd in a series on unlikely Christmas texts)

December 6, 2015
(2nd Sunday of Advent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-18 "DOWNWARDLY MOBILE BY CHOICE"

External Opposition (1:27-30) To Internal Life (Divided)

A) vv. 1-3 COMPLETE MY JOY, BE A UNITED CHURCH: BASIS(v.1) + GOAL(v.2) + APPEAL(v.3).

1 So if, therefore, All Four Reasons For Unity Are True In Christ/ In The Spirit
a there is any encouragement in Christ, (which there is!) Rapid Series of Clauses: Heart-felt Appeal
b if any incentive (comfort) of love, (which there is!) 4 Motivations (The Solid Grounding)
a' if any participation (koinonia) in the Spirit, (which there is!) Fellowship, 1:5, 27, Gal. 3:2, 1 Cor. 12:3
b' if any affection (compassion) and sympathy (mercy), (which there is!) 1:8, Double Virtue: Affection/Sympathy
Union With Christ/Spirit Cancels Factiousness
2 a COMPLETE MY JOY by being of the same mind, Make me happy! 10x in Phil., 1:7, Common Way Of Thinking/Acting
b having the same love, 4 Outcomes (The Task: Unity Of Mind (2x), Love, Accord)
b' being in full accord Lit. "united in soul"= soulmates, Unity Does Not = Uniformity
a' and of one mind. unanimous, 1:27, Common Purpose, Unity From Christ/Spirit & Hard Work Of The Community
v.3 Points To Problem In Community/vv.14-16

B) v.3 DO NOTHING WITH BAD MOTIVES: KILLS CHURCH. Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 90-109

3 (-) Do nothing from selfish ambition(faction) or conceit(empty glory), 1:17, Double Vice: Selfishness/Conceit, Gal. 5:20
(+) but in humility count others better than yourselves. Lev. 16:29, Alien Virtue: Humility (2:8, 3:21, 4:12), Mk. 10:33-34
Paul Wants Unity In Love/Service, Not Uniform Robots

C) v.4 CARE FOR "THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS". Take Neighbor Into Account

4 Let each of you look not (only) to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. only Not In Gk.
Listen, Love, Learn, Serve

D) vv.5-11 STORY OF JESUS CHRIST: HUMILITY AND OBEDIENCE.

Practical Wisdom/Mind- 10x:(1:7, 2:2[2x], 5, 3:15[2x],19,4:2,10[2x]

1) vv.5-7 Pre-Existence And Incarnation: Empty Self (Is/Ought)

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 4:2, Communal/Social Reality
//Hymns: Eph. 5:19, Col. 1:15-20, 3:16; I Tim. 3:16
6 a "who, though he was in the form (the very nature) of God, Jn. 17:5, Pre-existence
b did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, An "Advantage" To Exploit
7 but emptied himself, Kenosis, Self-giving, Self-limiting God
a' taking the form (the very nature) of a servant, = Slave (Offensive: Lowest Of Low), Down
b' being born in the likeness of men. Incarnation: Assumes Full Humanity; Sin Excepted
vv.5-11 = Drama Of Salvation, Echoes 3:20-21

2) v.8 Earthly Ministry: Humble/Obedient Self Christ Acted Thinking

And being found in human form/ he humbled himself Rather Die Than Disobey,Dt. 21:23
and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Humiliation/Exaltation Theme
See Mark 10:45, High To Low Position

1') vv.9-11 Resurrection And Return: Vindicated Self Resurrection!

9 Therefore also God has highly exalted him Resurrection/Ascension/Session = Cosmic Lord
and bestowed on him the name Humanity Welded Into God's Heart!
which is above every name,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, Is. 45:23, Rev. 4:2-11, Before All
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, Humans/Demons-Angels/The Dead
11 and every tongue confess that "Jesus is Lord," to the glory of God the Father." No Exceptions!
Christ, Spirit (v.1), Father (v.11), Pliny Letters 110

C') vv.12-13 CARE FOR "YOUR OWN SALVATION", OBEY.

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, //Christ's Obedience v.8
not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, 1:27, Test Of Character
continue to work out your (pl.) own salvation with fear and trembling; Double Virtue: 1 Cor. 2:3, Eph. 6:5
13 for God is at work in(among) you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Double Goal
God's Grace Energizes/Grounds Our Efforts

B') vv.14-16 DO ALL THINGS WITHOUT BAD ATTITUDES, EYE TO THE FUTURE.

14 (Continue to) Do all things without grumbling or questioning, Ex. 16:7, Double Vice: Grumbling/Questioning
15 that you may be blameless and innocent, Double Virtue: Blameless/Innocent
children of God without blemish in the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation," 1:28,Opponents? Dt. 32:5 LXX
among whom you shine(appear) as lights (stars) in the world, Is. 49:6, Double Vice: Crooked/Perverse
16 holding fast (holding forth?) the word of life,
so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Gal. 2:2, Double: Run/Labor
1 Cor. 3:13, 4:1-5

A') vv. 17-18 REJOICE WITH ME. Libation Poured Over Sacrificial Animal

17 Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, 4:18b, Martyr's Death Or Service?
I am glad and REJOICE with you all. Double Virtue (2x): Be Glad/Rejoice
18 Likewise you also should be glad and REJOICE with me.

DOWNWARDLY MOBILE BY CHOICE

“... taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

Paul’s couplet on the incarnation.

PHILIPPIANS 2:7

Joe Cumming is a bright guy. I say that because of where he works. Cumming is a fellow of the Faith and Culture Center at Yale and has a special interest in respectful Christian witness to Muslims- among whom he lived for years. Joe once had the opportunity to meet with the Lebanese Ayatollah- one of the most influential Muslim clerics in the world. It was the day before the holiest day of the year for Shiites, sort of like asking for an audience with the Pope on Christmas Eve.

The sheik's secretary said Joe could have five minutes, and at four minutes and fifty-five seconds he should be standing to leave. As Joe prayed about what to say, he saw a banner across the road. In Arabic it read, "The victory of blood over the sword," and he knew it was an historical reference. When the enemies of Muhammad's grandson Hussein came to kill him, he could have called on God to kill them. Instead, he laid down his sword and was massacred, becoming a sign of forgiving the sins of others. So, when the Ayatollah asked Joe what he had to say, Joe said, "Doesn't that banner mean that Hussein won a greater victory by laying down his life?"

"Yes," said the sheikh, "that's what it means."

"That's what I believe about Jesus," said Joe, "He could have killed his enemies; instead, he laid down his life for them in love, and prayed for their forgiveness. I believe that is the key to break the cycle of violence and revenge in the world."

The Ayatollah turned to his followers, "I totally agree with every word this Christian man of God has just said."

Joe stood to leave; his five minutes were up. "Where are you going?" said the

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sheikh. "There's more I want to talk about." He kept Joe for two hours.

At one point the Ayatollah brought up the death of two little boys on the West Bank, killed by a misfired missile as they played soccer. "What do you have to say about this as a Christian?" he asked.

Joe replied, "I look at the suffering of all innocent victims through the lens of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. I might wonder at times if God has abandoned the human race. But in the suffering of Jesus Christ, I see the sign of God's solidarity with all innocent victims of violence and suffering."

The sheikh turned again to his followers, "I agree with every word this Christian man of God has just said."¹

When we- in humble boldness and with the Spirit's help- simply speak the truths of the faith, there is the ring of truth about them. God provides the connecting points and the convincing power, not us. Had Cumming not been made alert through prayer, he would have missed the banner that gave the link he needed, "The victory of blood over the sword." How utterly creative is the Holy Spirit, how perfect his timing. Five minutes became two hours because of the deep truth that Jesus absorbed suffering rather than inflict it, that in him all the suffering of the world have One with whom to identify, one who understands. What God did with the witness after Joe's departure we do not know.

Yes, Christian witness is about preparation, but more than that it's about availability and trust. Do I know the core truths about the person of Jesus, what he's done and what it means? and here the Apostles' Creed is a great short outline. Do I have a simple story to tell about what he's done for me? Am I willing- when probed- to be honest about my struggles, failings and unresolved questions. Can I say, "I don't know," and then go find out? Am I open to the insights and links of the Holy Spirit? Do I value people? Can I listen long enough to their stories and questions for the Spirit to make the necessary connections? It's a discipline; it's an art form; it's a privilege; it's our job; and you rarely know when an opportunity will come your way, as happened to me several years ago one morning at Starbucks on Stratford Road in Winston Salem.

Lori and I were in town for her uncle Claude's funeral where I was to give the eulogy later that morning. As is customary when we stayed at her Aunt Katherine's house, Lori sleeps in; I get up and head out for my morning fix. I was already dressed

¹ Edited, PreachingToday search under Philippians 2:1-18.

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for the funeral: suit, clergy shirt, collar, with a new book under my arm: Mark Mittelberg's *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask*.²

When in Winston I usually arrive at the cathedral of caffeine around 6:30am, but today it was 8:00, and it was a happening place. College and med students with laptops, young professionals heading to work, women in high heels and pea coats, leggings and boots- a regular fashion show. In front of me were two men in matching outfits holding hands. To my left was a short woman in a red coat, conservative looking except for the diamond stud piercing her right nostril. At first I thought it was a flick of glitter, but it was not. What made me notice was what she ordered. It was a Venti, pumpkin-spiced, decaff latte, Ethiopian dark roast with whipped cream, heated to 180 in a holiday cup with cinnamon. I chuckled, "That's quite an order." She smiled.

I placed my boring order for a cup of coffee and moved right to the pick up line. When mine came up I turned to find a seat. There she stood in front of me in the tight crowd, all four foot eleven of her- looking like a little red elf. She looked up at me, and what she said startled me, "So, preacher, what's the question?"

"What question?" I responded, a bit off balance.

"*The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask*." Isn't that the book you're reading?

Then it hit me. She had read the spine as we stood in line. This is a God thing, I thought to myself, and I am now on the witness stand, so I went for it.

"Well, about year ago the Barna Group did a national survey of the questions Christians most fear being asked, and this is the book that came out of it. I'm using it in a class I teach to high school seniors in January." I then decided to test her a bit with a technical question, "Are you interested in *evidential apologetics*?"

She nodded. That she knew what I was talking about moved the conversation to a different level. I was dealing with a serious person who respected rational and historical evidence for the Christian faith. All this in about twenty seconds.

"What's your interest?" I asked, feeling my way into the flow of the moment.

"It's my fourteen year old daughter," she said, "she's having a hard time believing much of anything these days."

Bingo! Thank you, Holy Spirit! Pay dirt. Several people around us were interested in our conversation, but there was a press to pick up their orders. By now,

² Colorado Springs, CO: Tyndale, 2010.

her Blackberry was out, thumbs moved at lightning speed sending a text to herself as I dictated the name of the author and title.

“Here’s what you do,” I said. “Read it with her a chapter at a time. Ask her to recount Mark’s argument and ask, ‘Did I find him convincing?’ Don’t expect her just to swallow the evidence; the important thing is that she learn to think critically about the faith.”

She nodded in agreement. “Sounds great,” she said, “and thanks.” About that time her Venti, pumpkin-spiced, decaff latte, Ethiopian dark roast with whipped cream, heated to 180 in a holiday cup with cinnamon was called out and placed steaming on the counter. With a glance and a smile she was out the door. I shook my head in disbelief. What had just transpired?

It took maybe a minute and a half for the whole conversation in the middle of a caffeine-craving crowd. I walked to my table smiling and started in on Chapter 4, Question 4, “Everyone knows that Jesus was a good man and a wise teacher- so why try to make him into the Son of God too?” That morning my theology was simple: a God who can hear the prayer of a concerned mother and call me to the witness stand in a Starbuck’s line in a city away from home can surely help me through a family funeral in a few hours. What God did with my witness after her departure, I do not know; it’s part of the trusting. We witness and leave the results to the prosecuting attorney- the Holy Spirit- who makes his case for Christ in meetings with Lebanese Ayatollahs and the worried moms of teenage girls.

You see, friends, and this is basic, foundational, elemental. Ours is a God willing to *come down* and get near all kinds of people, because this is the God who has shown up in Jesus, a God who assumes not the disguise but the reality of human flesh and inserts himself in the lowliest of places: a virgin’s womb, a sheep’s feeding trough, suckling a young woman’s breast, having his dirty diapers changed, growing up in a hick village in an occupied country, and finally laying down his life as soldiers mock and nails are driven through his holy flesh as an enacted political cartoon about the futility of bucking the Jewish and Roman status quo in the name of another kingdom.

God come down, God become vulnerable, God become weak, God become fully accessible, God with morning breath, God will childhood diseases and no dental care, God embracing daily life and finally death, God come near in the low and hidden places, even the horrible places: this is our amazing God, and it is the job of

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the church to announce and enact and communicate this vision of God so that the Holy Spirit was good raw materials to work with in order the make the case for Jesus Christ. The prosperity gospel, the feel-good gospel, the easy-living gospel, the American-first gospel, the give-the-kids-a-little-morality-gospel, and the if-only-you-get-the-techniques-right gospel are all poor raw materials, so beware of substitutes.

Like you, I had always been taught to read and write from beginning to end in a more or less straight line. Find the thesis, follow the argument as it develops in logical order, then look for the conclusion at the end. It's the academic term paper model where every word counts. Highly linear, a-b-c, 1-2-3, step-by-step with a premium on clarity. It was not until I got to Dr. Talbert's New Testament class at Wake Forest in the fall of '72- and today I can take you to the desk in which I was sitting- that I learned how modern this way of thinking was. It was the result of the invention of the printing press, when communication shifted from oral to written, and to linear thinking with its demand for air-tight clarity.

But it was not so in the ancient world where the Bible was formed from oral traditions and the traditions of rhetoric which order communications in different ways than our modern preferences. We write for the eye and rationality; they spoke for the ear to engage the imagination. In that world it's not so much what's at the end that counts but what is found in the center and at the core, and if you rush past it to the end you miss the point. In their world you work up to the center, then away from it with echoes. We write 1-2-3; they wrote 1-2-3-2-1. It goes by several names: chiasm, inverted parallelism, ring structure. It's the way they spoke and told stories; it's the way the wrote down what they spoke. And, if you know it, you can find it.

So it is with our paragraph from Philippians this morning. There is good stuff at the start and finish about how we are to think and behave now that we know Christ, but the jewel is at the center in verses 5 through 11, and to make it easy to see I've printed it in red. At the center Paul quotes an early Christian hymn or creed about Jesus- who he is, where he has come from, what he came to do, and why it matters.

We can be a people who behave and live differently than the world around us for one reason: we now belong to Christ and our lives are being patterned after his. We can keep our minds on the good stuff (v.1), guard the unity of the church (v.2), have God deal with the vices of selfish ambition and conceit (vv.3-4), make us lights in the darkness because we are his followers and he is at work within each of us (vv.12-16), even rejoice in difficulties (vv.17-18). Someone else is at work in the

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depths of my life. All you see is me, but the Spirit of Jesus is working within and developing me as a faithful witness.

The bibliography of scholarly books and articles written on these seven verses would itself be a small book, so extensive is the research. And why is there such interest? Because here we have Paul in the fifties of the first century- only twenty five or so years after the events themselves- either himself composing or passing on an elegantly formed summary of the person and work of Jesus Christ. He assumes the Philippians will recognize it as part of his earlier teaching when he founded the church. And the intellectual claims of this poem or creed are utterly astounding. We already have the mind of Christ Jesus, says Paul, and now we are to put it into practice together. But just who was he, and can it be reduced to a brief memorizeable summary? Yes it can.

Go back with me in your imagination. Way back. There was One who pre-existed all creation, who was there before time and space exploded from the singularity of the Big Bang. Way back when there was only the Triune God and no before-or-after, no here-or-there, not empty space but nothing at all if you can imagine that, and there God was. So rich was the eternal communion of love in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that there was nothing to fear, nothing to have to hold on to or grasp in order to keep it. And so- when needed, and at just the right time in history- God the Son emptied himself of all the privileges of deity in a great descent as the Son was sent from the Father and enabled by the Spirit to be conceived and finally- as Paul says- *born in the likeness of men*. This is first sweeping move Paul announces in verses 6 and 7:

“... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, *being born in the likeness of men*.”

So what is Christmas? It's a wrinkly, red newborn to be circumcised on day eight and given the name the angel commanded: Jesus. God has personally inserted himself into human history in this child. Incarnation is God assuming human flesh and laying aside the privileges of deity without ceasing to be divine. Emmanuel- God with us up close! To explain Jesus requires God language. He did not come to us from us; he came to us from outside us and above us - from God. He's not just a good Jewish kid who did well because he had a good mom. No, though now hidden in flesh, he shares the form and nature of God, or else he is no good to us.

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But that new human status- low as it was- was not yet low enough. It was followed by three decades of Nazareth obscurity, two to three years of public ministry, then a sudden downward move. First he surrendered the privileges of deity and emptied himself into humanity; he now voluntarily surrenders his life itself to the forces of religion and government that stand opposed to his new way. Verse 8 is the second move down, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself *even further* and become obedient unto death, *even death on a cross*,” the most shameful and torturous death ever devised, utterly humiliated. Down from deity into humanity, now down from this life to wherever the dead reside— in other words as low and you can go. So wherever you may wander, and how high or low you go, Jesus has already been there and hidden his treasures of grace under your feet.

Now because of who he is and what he’s done, Jesus’ death cannot be the end, or else all the forces of evil and meanness in this world have won so that God is not God- at least not here on planet earth. But there is a silent period from Friday at about 3:00pm to sunrise two days later. God does not have to rush to fix things too quickly. Give it time for the cross in all its finality to sink in before God kicks open a hidden door. So Jesus lies in darkness; he lies in state in a borrowed tomb. He is dead, and his disciples are intellectually bewildered and spiritually nauseous from the vertigo of it all. Life is spinning. What went wrong? What did we miss? Nothing. This was the divine purpose, that the humanity of God the Son be utterly humiliated and discounted in death to demonstrate just what’s wrong with the world as a whole. This is how we act when God shows up in person; we kill him. We strung him up!

Then something happened. No one saw the event itself- though soon enough there were the after-effects of the empty tomb and his multiple re-appearances, which for the Jewish women and men who saw him had only one explanation: Jesus has been bodily raised and entered the kingdom. Resurrection is more than resuscitation back to this life; resurrection means Jesus is now alive with the life of God in a new, indestructible body. The exaltation of ascension means he’s been carried to where he was before and from which he now appears. The appearances mean he lets us his followers and an enemy named Paul in on his secret and promises to continue the work through us. His *name*- a cipher for who he is and what he had done- is now the revealed divine standard; he is the ruler— the Lord- before whom all will stand. And- whether willingly or unwillingly- all without exception will one day acknowledge who he is; our privilege as disciples is to do bow the knee ahead of time and voluntarily. To be a follower of Jesus means you are correctly aligned.

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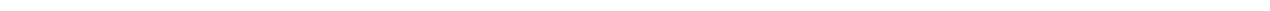
Down from deity into humanity- the first move; down from human life into human death- the second move; and now- in a third great sweep of the divine hand- Jesus is more than restored and- as a bonus- carries our humanity with him into the heart of God. Verses 9 through 11:

“Therefore also God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that ‘Jesus is Lord,’ to the glory of God the Father.”

Christmas: he came down. Good Friday: he went as low as you can go. Easter: he was fully and gloriously restored. Ascension: he is with the Father on full display, giving birth to his church and having apostles like Paul compose creeds and hymns to make the big stuff memorable in poetry.

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey shares an episode from his youth when the concept of “the Word becoming flesh” dawned on him with profound meaning:

“I learned about incarnation when I kept a salt-water aquarium. Management of a marine aquarium, I discovered, is no easy task. I had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content. I pumped in vitamins and antibiotics and sulfa drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. I filtered the water through glass fibers and charcoal, and exposed it to ultraviolet light. You would think, in view of all the energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow loomed above the tank they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed me one emotion only: fear. Although I opened the lid and dropped in food on a regular schedule, three times a day, they responded to each visit as a sure sign of my designs to torture them. I could not convince them of my true concern. To my fish I was deity. I was too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy they saw as cruelty; my attempts at healing they viewed as destruction. To change their perceptions I began to see would require a form of incarnation. I would have to become a fish and 'speak' to them in a



language they could understand.”³

The novelist Madeline L’Engle wrote, “The virgin birth is far less mind-boggling than the power of all Creation stooping so low as to become one of us.”⁴ This is what Christmas means, and this is our story and our hope.

CONCLUSION

This is it; this is where it starts. A needy, broken, sinful, violent, infested ignorant and dying world, a virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, a true historical Incarnation, a live birth, the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, a church limping through time, and finally today and this moment- your life and destiny.

Will you become his apprentice and follower? Will you let him place you where he will in order that his story be told? Before Lebanese Ayatollahs- if that is required, or worried mothers in Starbucks- if that is his will?

He wants you, and he wants to use you. I know no other way to explain my exceedingly odd, adventuresome life. His fingerprints are all over me. To find your own version of the Jesus-shaped life, come to the table with a simple prayer in your heart, “I want to know you Lord.” That’s enough to start, or to restart. Then wait and see what happens.

And that’s all I have to say. Anything more must come from him.

³ PreachingToday.com search under *Incarnation*.

⁴ Idem.
