

The Heart of Christmas

1. Warm-up Question: Anatole France said, “Until you’ve loved an animal, a part of your soul remains unawakened.” Tell us about one of the most beloved pets you’ve ever had.
2. At the outset of Sunday’s sermon, Jeff talked about how much he loves dogs. Despite all their wonderful attributes, though, dogs do have some disgusting habits, like rolling in dead animals, eating grass, and smelling behinds. As a thought experiment, Jeff asked how we would respond if God said, “All the dogs (or cats) in the world are at grave risk. The only way to save them is if one of us becomes one of them to show them the way.” Suppose God asked you to be the one.
 - a. Brainstorm a list of the things you would lose if you became a dog (or cat).
 - b. Would you be willing to become a dog (or cat) if that was necessary to save them? Do you think you could make the sacrifice? Why or why not?
3. The purpose of the thought experiment was to help us imagine what it was like for Jesus to make the decision to give up heaven and the privileges of divinity to become a mere *Homo sapien*. Read Philippians 2:4-11.
 - a. What does verse 6 mean? Put it in your own words.
 - b. In verse 7, what does it mean to say that Christ “emptied” himself? Emptied himself of what?
 - c. There are various kinds of humans, e.g., privileged humans, disadvantaged humans. According to verses 7-8, what kind of human did Jesus become?
4. There are different ways of imagining what Jesus’ earthly experience was like. Some imagine that he only pretended to be human while secretly retaining all the knowledge and power he had while in heaven. By contrast, Philippians 2:7 seems to suggest that Jesus temporarily “emptied” himself of all his heavenly privileges while on earth, so he could live within the same constraints we humans do. Jeff compared this to when a President uses the 25th amendment to suspend his or her right to exercise presidential powers while undergoing surgery, then reclaims those powers afterward. During the suspension period, the person is still president, but cannot exercise any presidential powers.
 - a. How do you imagine Jesus’ earthly experience? While he was here on earth do you think he had any special privileges or powers?
 - b. Once Jesus’ disciples tried to work a miracle, but couldn’t. So Jesus stepped in and did it. Afterward, they asked Jesus why they couldn’t do it. Read his response in Matthew 17:19-20. Also read John 14:12. Based on what Jesus said in these passages, do you think Jesus had access to special powers that we don’t?

- c. Jeff said, “When Jesus was born on earth, he had to start from scratch. He had to rediscover who he was and relearn everything, or at least as much as he could comprehend with a human brain.” When Jesus first opened his eyes as a newborn infant in the manger, do you think he was aware of his identity as Son of God? As an infant, do you think he had divine knowledge and power? If not, at what point in his life do you think Jesus reawakened to his identity and his special role as Son of God?

5. Matt Proctor says, “In your pain, you may be tempted to say, ‘Jesus, you have no idea what I’m going through. You have no idea how bad I’m hurting.’ But Jesus can respond, ‘Yes, I do.’ He can point to your wounds and then to his own and say, ‘Look: same, same. Me too. I have entered your world, and I know how you feel. I have been there, I am with you now, I care, and I can help.’ That is what Christmas is all about.”
 - a. Give an example of a time in your life when it was important for you to know that Jesus had similar experiences and feelings during his own earthly sojourn.
 - b. Imagine Jesus had not come to earth as a genuine full-fledged human. How would that change how you feel about him? How might that change how he feels about us?

6. The idea that Jesus, Son of God, entered fully and completely into the human experience is called the Doctrine of Incarnation. As followers of Jesus, we’re called to repeat this basic pattern in our own lives. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:5. Just like Jesus, we’re encouraged to dare to get out of our own little world and into someone else’s. When we do this, we’re engaged in what’s called “Incarnational Living.”
 - a. Tell us about a time when you’ve done that – a time when you stepped out of the realm of your own privilege and experience, and genuinely tried to enter into someone else’s very different experience, pain, struggle, or challenge.
 - b. What did it feel like when you first opened yourself up to someone else’s very different world or way of being?
 - c. After it was over, how did you feel? Were you glad you did it? Were you better off for the experience?
 - d. Verses 9-11 in our Philippians passage tells us that, because Jesus was willing to humble himself and enter into the human experience, God has now highly exalted him, giving him a name above all names and making him Lord of the cosmos. What does that suggest about how our own Incarnational Experiences will affect us?
 - e. Who in your life right now needs you to step out of your world and into theirs, maybe not permanently, but long enough to be with them and to feel what they’re feeling, so they’re not so alone?