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Preached at Grace Church, Alexandria, Virginia
First Sunday after Christmas - December 29, 2013

Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147:13-21
Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7
John 1:1-18

"Almighty God, who hast poured upon us the new light of thine incarnate Word: Grant that the same light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives."

We are now five days into the season of Christmas, continuing to celebrate the miraculous birth of God, Jesus - the child of Bethlehem, the new light shining and overcoming the darkness.

The opening prayer this morning speaks of this miracle, the Incarnation of God, as "new light", which is poured upon us. Everything in this Christmas season reminds us of how the birth of God in human form gives us hope, joy, and peace.

But I think it can be helpful to take a step back, to ask and remember "why?" What is it about this birth that promises hope, joy, and peace? What about it changes anything, let alone changing everything? What has happened because of the Incarnation?

What has God done by becoming a human?

The Incarnation is a deep and rich Mystery, and we could reflect for days or years or all our lives on what it means. But today I would like to take a moment to explore three things that God has done through the Incarnation, or rather three things that Jesus became by becoming human.

God was born in human form, and by this act He became our brother, He became an example to us, and He became our savior.

To begin with, God became our brother. What does this mean?

God became an actual human being, as human as any of us. He was born into a family and shared the common experiences - good and bad - that we all have in families and other human relationships.

And He also became part of the broader human family. Jesus is our brother in the sense that all humans are our brothers and sisters, and all our lives are connected and bound up with each other. We do not exist as wholly separate islands - what happens to one of us matters to the whole. And so it is, with Jesus. He experiences human sorrows and joys as a fellow human. And likewise, His own sufferings and triumphs are ours as well.

But this is not all the God has done in becoming a human. He has also become an example for us.

Jesus is our teacher. He spoke countless words of guidance and direction for how we can live lives more in line with the loving will of God. More oriented towards God's love for each of us. Jesus summarized all divine teaching - his own words on earth and all that has been recorded in Scripture - as being focused on how we can love God and love our neighbors.

But Jesus did not teach only by words. His most profound lessons to us about how we might live are in the examples of His own life. A life characterized by profound love and compassion, by a constant readiness to give of Himself to serve the needs of others. This finds expression throughout His ministry in His constant healings, His miraculous provision of food to the hungry, in His loving encounters with so many people who were seeking him. And above all, we see that He loved others as much as His own self in His willingness to risk and eventually lay down His life for the sake of this message of love.

And it is through that act that we also know that Jesus became a third thing for us by becoming human. He became our savior.

Because there is a great breach, a wound in the relationship between humanity and God.

We are each created by God. We are blessed with life, and skills, and gifts, and relationships. And we are called, each of us, by God to use these gifts in service to our Creator and His world. There are works that God has fitted each one of us, in particular, to do. We each have particular loves and gifts and relationships that God calls us to serve through.

But how often we turn away. We squander our gifts, ignore our passions, and do things to neglect or cause deliberate harm to the people God has placed around us. We sin. And we turn against God's loving plans for us.

There is a wound in the relationship between humanity and God. We humans, who receive our very existence as a pure gift from God, turn against Him and the other creatures He has made. This is not what God intended. In the stories of creation we are told the truth that God created us to be in friendship with Him, to love Him and delight in Him, as He delights in us, and to work beside Him by caring for the world He has made.

But we find we just can't. We keep turning against Him, breaking the love and trust that should be between us and God. Daily, in big ways or small, we choose for our selfish desires instead of for love, and we hurt ourselves, and others, and we hurt our relationships with God. And try as we might, we find we cannot perfectly live the life God intends for us. We keep turning away, and just like in any human relationship, when we break trust with another, it's not easy to repair the wound. It's not easy to build trust again.

But this is what Jesus could do. Jesus could take the step to make things right - to repair the broken trust between humanity and God. Because Jesus, fully human and tempted to all the same selfishness and sin that tempts the rest of us, was able to resist temptation. Because He lived in perfect harmony and love with God and God's will for His life. Because He is the Son of God, as well as a human. And so Jesus did what we could not. He lived His life as it was meant to be lived, in harmony with the loving purposes of God.

While we, each day, turn against our Creator and misuse the gift of life that He has given us, Jesus never did. He lived wholly for love, a perfect human life, and He did not deserve the suffering and death that came to Him. And yet He was willing even to give up His life, to be an example to us here also, of how to live and die with perfect trust in God, and perfect dedication to God's will. He surrendered His life, and showed that it was possible for a human being to live and die in perfect love for God.

And this, my brothers and sisters, has healed the wound. In Jesus Christ, humanity has lived up to all we were meant to be. In Jesus Christ, God and humanity have had trust restored, and our relationship is reconciled. Because we humans are all bound up, one with another, the triumph of Christ can be our triumph as well. And we are united to His triumph when we are united to His life and death and resurrection in the waters of baptism.

And so, though we will continue to stumble and sin and turn against God, we can keep turning back. And we can say to God, "Look not at our sins, Lord, but on the life and the love of Jesus." And God will look at our human faces and see in us the face of Jesus our brother and our savior. And we can begin again with hope, because God will forgive us, for Jesus' sake. We have been reconciled, reunited, brought to peace and trust with God.

And so despite the darkness of our own sin, a new light is shining because God was made human. And this light shines on us anew each day that we turn to God. And as the light of Christ shines on us, let us fervently pray that it does set a fire of love in our hearts and that it shines forth in the way we live our lives, as we seek to follow the path and the example of our brother and savior, Jesus.