

John 1:14

By Santiago Lange



When did Christmas began? I'm not referring to the celebration of Jesus' birth on December 25 because we don't actually exactly know when He was born. The Bible doesn't say and it doesn't give us many clues. I'm asking a slightly different question. When did the earthly life of Jesus Christ REALLY begin? John 1:14 tells us that "the Word (referring to Jesus Christ) became flesh and lived among us." That takes us back before Bethlehem to the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. Christmas began not in Bethlehem but nine months earlier when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and implanted within her the divine-human Person of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Luke 1:35).

Christmas began in the womb of a virgin girl. God spent his first nine months on earth as a preborn baby. Fully alive. Fully human. Fully God. That is why the ancient creeds affirm that Jesus was "conceived of the Holy Spirit." He didn't become the God-man at Bethlehem. He was God incarnate from the moment of conception.

John 1:14 may not seem like a great Christmas text, but it is the truth behind the story of the angels and shepherds and the Wise Men and the journey to Bethlehem. Without this verse, the rest of the story has no meaning. The text tells us what really happened 2000 years ago, and what it means for us today.

The whole truth about Christmas is contained in the first phrase of the text-"The Word became flesh." Theologians call this truth the Incarnation. It's a hard concept to understand, and in the early church there were many debates about what it really meant. Some people said Jesus wasn't really a man, He just looked like a man. Maybe He was something like a ghost. Others said He had the body of a man but He didn't have a human soul. Still others said Jesus was two people in one body, sort of half-God and half-man. And skeptics said it was all nonsense, that Jesus wasn't God at all. They claimed he was an ordinary person just like everyone else on planet earth.

But all those ideas are wrong. When Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb, the infinite God took on the form of a tiny unborn baby boy. Eternal God added humanity-surely the greatest miracle of all time. No one can fully understand how it happened. The Son did not cease to be God when He became a man. He added manhood but he did not subtract deity. He was fully God and fully man, the God-man.

The Almightyness of God moved in a human arm. The love of God now beat in a human heart. The wisdom of God now spoke from human lips. The mercy of God reached forth from human hands. God was always a God of love but when Christ came to the earth, love was wrapped in

human flesh. Jesus was God with skin on. God Himself came down and entered the human race. He became just like us so that forever we would hear Him saying, "I love you."

One of the verses of a famous Christmas carol says it very well:

**Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord.
Late in time behold him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail the incarnate Deity.
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark, the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."**

Eugene Peterson translates the first part of John 1:14 as follows, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." For 33 years God moved into our neighborhood. The NIV says that he "made his dwelling among us." Some translations say that He "pitched his tent among us." That's very accurate because the Greek word for "made his dwelling" literally means to pitch a tent. It's the same word used for the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, the tent where the glory of God dwelt in the days before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. The Tabernacle was sometimes called the "Tent of Meeting" (Exodus 33:7) because it was the divinely-appointed meeting place between God and man. In the same way, but in a much deeper sense, Jesus is the place where we meet God today.

In the Bible three kinds of people lived in tents, shepherds, sojourners, and soldiers. They lived in tents because they never stayed in one place very long. Jesus lived in the "tent" of his humanity for 33 years on the earth because he too was a shepherd, a sojourner, and a soldier. He came to be the Good Shepherd, he came as a visitor from heaven, and he came as the Captain of our Salvation to defeat evil once and for all.

Jesus was God's rescue mission to the human race. When His mission was over, He went back to heaven. While He was here, He pitched His tent among us. When His time was up, He took His tent of human flesh and rejoined His Father in heaven.

John next speaks of the manifestation of God's glory: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father." Eugene Peterson again, "We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son." With Jesus that picture is taken to infinite perfection. Jesus is the exact image of his Father. If you have seen Him, you have seen the Father (John 14:9).

When John says, "we have seen," he uses a word that means to gaze intently upon, to study as in a laboratory. It's the word from which we get the English word "theater." As Jesus walked on the earth, people could see God's glory shining through him. The shepherds saw it, and so did the angels. So did the doctors of the law who interviewed Him when he was 12 years old. The glory was seen in a major way at the Transfiguration. When Jesus turned the water into wine at Cana of Galilee, John tells us that "he thus revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11).

He was not invisible nor was he obscure. When you look at Jesus, you see the face of God. In the words of Martin Luther,

He whom the world could not enwrap

**Yonder lies in Mary's lap
He is become an infant small
Who by his might upholdeth all.**

Finally, the text ends with a powerful word of invitation. It tells us that Jesus came to the earth "full of grace and truth." Eugene Peterson says He was "generous inside and out, true from start to finish." Grace and truth are two attributes that don't often appear together. We humans tend to err on one side or the other. We need both. Grace and truth. These two words explain why Jesus came to the earth. They go to the very heart of the Gospel. Because He was full of grace, He died for us while we were yet sinners. Because He was full of truth, He was able to pay for our sins completely. He forgives the sinner because He bore the sin Himself.

Here is truly good news for all people. Because He is Grace-full, we can come just as we are. He is easy to approach and we don't have to clean ourselves up first. Christ invites us to come to Him with no preconditions except a sincere desire to be forgiven. Because He is truth-full, we can come in complete confidence that He will keep His promises. When He promises a complete pardon for our sins, He means it.

The theologian Harry Ironside liked to tell a story about Czar Nicholas I of Russia. It seems that the czar had a good friend who asked him to provide a job for his son. This the czar did, appointing the son as paymaster for a barracks in the Russian army. However, it turned out that the son was morally weak and soon gambled away nearly all the money entrusted to him. When the word came that the auditors were going to examine his records, the young man despaired, knowing that he was certain to be found out. He calculated the amount he owed and the total came to a huge debt, far greater than he could ever pay. He determined that the night before the auditors arrived, he would take his gun and commit suicide at midnight. Before going to bed, he wrote out a full confession, listing all he had stolen, writing underneath it these words, "A great debt. Who can pay?" Then he fell asleep, weary from his exertions.

Late that night, the czar himself paid a surprise visit to the barracks as was his occasional custom. Seeing a light on, he peered into the room and found the young man asleep with the letter of confession next to him. He read the letter and instantly understood what had happened. He paused for a moment, considering what punishment to impose, then he bent over, wrote one word on the paper, and left.

Eventually the young man woke up, realizing that he had slept past midnight. Taking his gun, he prepared to kill himself when he noticed that someone had written something on the ledger. Under his words "A great debt. Who can pay?" he saw one word: "Nicholas." He was dumbfounded and then terrified when he realized that someone knew what he had done. Checking his records, he found that the signature was genuine. Finally the thought settled in his mind that the czar knew the whole story and was willing to pay the debt himself. Resting on the words of his commander-in-chief, he fell asleep. In the morning a messenger came from the palace with the exact amount the young man owed. Only the czar could pay. And the czar did pay.

Only Jesus could pay our debt to God. That and that alone explains why "the Word became flesh and lived among us." He pitched his tent with us for 33 years that he might pay in His own blood the debt we owed because of our sin. When we look at our sins and realize our

hopeless condition, we say, “A great debt. Who can pay?” Then the Lord Jesus Christ steps forward and signs His name to our ledger: “Jesus Christ.” Only Jesus could pay. And He does.

In just a few weeks Christmas will arrive and families will gather to open their gifts. God has a Christmas gift for all of us, wrapped not in bright paper and with colorful ribbon. It is the gift of amazing Grace, it is the gift of His Son!

All of creation rejoice! ☐