



EXPRESSIONS

OUR VISION

A church deeply formed by the Good News of Jesus Christ, experiencing and expressing God's grace together in Hattiesburg.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,
full of grace and truth. John 1:14 ESV*



EARTH AND HEAV'N BEFORE HIM BOW

Davis Morgan

*No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father's side,
he has made him known. — John 1:18*

*"Twas much, that man was made like God before,
But, that God should be made like man, much more" — John Donne*

In 2011 I barely missed out on an amazing moment. My friends were all going to Jazz Fest in New Orleans to see, among others, The Avett Brothers in concert. I decided to sit it out. What I didn't know until it was too late was that, on their way back from New Orleans, my friends would stop at a small wayside interstate exit, to observe one of the commonest, most ordinary of roadtrip rituals — eating at a Cracker Barrel. Cracker Barrel is the best, because it's ordinary food for ordinary people. It's not what we would call a fancy place. Not somewhere with frequent celebrity sightings. And yet, as my friends buttered their biscuits and ordered their eggs, who should they glimpse out of the corner of their eyes but the headliners themselves, The Avett Brothers, seated, like them, with menus in hand at a Cracker Barrel table. The strangeness of it shouldn't be hard to appreciate. You don't expect to spot Grammy award winners near the giant checkerboard games by the fireplace, or around the corner from the innumerable knick knacks of the Cracker Barrel gift shop. The mind looks at such a

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scene and thinks “You? Here? Surely not. What’re you doing in a place like this?” Surprises like meeting a Grammy award winning artist in a Cracker Barrel are good practice for contemplating the shocking unexpectedness of Jesus’ Incarnation.

The ancient philosophers of the Greco-Roman world knew one thing for certain about the divine — it would never take on flesh. It was non-material, disembodied, completely other from flesh and blood. Untouchably remote — the pure logic and reason that was the primordial fabric of the Universe. *It would never be found in a place like this.* For Plato, it was the world of forms, of which our material existence was only a shadow. In its Gnostic form, which was current in many varieties in the early years of the Christian church, it held that the material universe was created by a wicked lower god — a Demiurge. In this scheme, the physical world was “The Abortion of Spirit”, and true enlightenment came as one freed the inner spirit with its divine spark from the prison of the material world — including the body.

Against that backdrop of Greco-Roman thought, it is telling that the Apostle John describes Jesus as The Word who takes on flesh. John depicts Jesus as the very Primordial Truth at the heart of the Universe — the thing the philosophers have been writing about and gazing into the sky pondering. But, says John, you must allow yourself to be baffled by the shocking intrusion of this Primordial Truth assuming a human body like ours, with all its fragility and weakness, and with all its messiness. One can understand why the philosophers longed for disembodied bliss. Bodies are complicated. They require maintenance. They don’t stay the same. They can be frankly, gross if you think about it. John wants us to be shocked by God entering into such a state. Our translations opt for a more gentle phrasing, but John 1:14 could easily read “The Word became *meat*.”

The Apostle John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God. Why is he called the Word? We all long for our words to match who we are underneath — to express ourselves in a way that satisfies us, and doesn’t leave us second-guessing our phrases. We long to be so articulate that someone could say that when you have our words, you truly have us. And while that seems to constantly escape us, God’s Word truly is the perfect expression of his character. To have his Word is to have his very

nature displayed to you. New Testament scholar D. A. Carson even went so far as to write that in a postmodern world, we could do worse than to translate John 1:1 “In the beginning, God expressed himself.”

Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the exact imprint of his nature” (Colossians 1:15). He is the full and final expression of God to us (Hebrews 1:1). As John says, he truly makes the Father known to us. And specifically, he makes him known as the Son who is at the Father’s side (“in the bosom of the Father” as older translations had it). If Jesus truly reveals God to us, then he reveals him explicitly as a loving Father. Preachers have often quipped that God’s favorite conjunction is the word “but.” If that’s true, I would suggest his favorite preposition is the little word “with” — for *radical “withness” is at the heart of the incarnation of Jesus.*

Leadership experts often say that the best leaders don’t just articulate the company’s message — they live it out. They embody the values and ideals of the movement they lead. Whether it’s George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr., the leader’s own life becomes an advertisement for their message. We might go so far as to say that *the leader is the message.*

So it is, on an even higher register, with the Incarnation of Jesus.

Before Jesus had ever preached a sermon or told a parable, before he had performed a miracle, even before he was able to utter a single word, he had already perfectly embodied the radical message of the Gospel — that the God who made heaven and earth stoops down to be with us as our Rescuer. Immanuel — ***God with us.***

It was the same message for Moses and the story of the Exodus. When he meets Moses in the form of a burning bush, God announces his response to the suffering of his people: “I have seen...and I have heard...and I have come down to deliver...” (Exodus 3:7-8). And although Moses fears his own inadequacy as a leader, God declares “But I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12). Bible scholars speculate that the covenant name of God, Yahweh (literally *I will be*), is actually an allusion, not just to his eternal existence, but to the promise of his presence — Immanuel — *God with us.*

The Rescuer God of the Exodus is not content to “be with us” in a disembodied abstract sense. He moves into the center of the mass of his people. For all the ornate and richly symbolic accoutrements of the Tabernacle, it is, at the end of the day, a tent. A temporary dwelling, in the middle of a huge camp of temporary dwellings. When God’s people live in a tent, he lives in a tent, prefiguring Jesus’ incarnation, in a way only the Apostle John highlights: “And the Word became flesh and *dwelt* (literally ‘Tabernacled,’) among us” (John 1:14). In Jesus’ birth, God pitched his tent among us once again — Immanuel — *God with us*.

Many years later, when the Tabernacle had given way to a magnificent Temple, King Solomon found himself rightly baffled at the strangeness of God’s dwelling with his people, even in such a glorious structure. “*But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!*” (1 Kings 8:27). And now, at the moment of Incarnation, we find an even greater heightening of that same thought — the One who dwells in thick darkness, who is unapproachably Other, uncontainable even by the highest of heaven — lies not in a palatial temple, but in a manger on the outskirts of a Nowhere town. The Christmas carol would have us rightly baffled that “*Earth and Heav’n before him bow / And He is in the manger now.*”

Why does Jesus go to all the fuss? Why the incarnation? The answer seems to be because God is a god of *radical “withness.”* Because he created you to be with him and will stop at nothing to be near to you. Even the sin that requires a perfect atoning sacrifice will not deter him from being with you. Perhaps even more than Solomon we may ask *will God dwell with me?* Will God dwell with my imperfections? With my deep-seeded shame? With my regrets? Even I don’t want to be with me! Why would God? And again, the Word who was with God at the beginning reveals the answer — because this God’s nature is that of a loving Father.

One implication of all of this is that your *being with God* comes before your *doing for God* (see Pete Scazzero’s *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*). This is a challenge for us duty-oriented, overthinking types, who struggle to put down our tasks and just *be*. But if Mary and Martha teach

us anything in Luke 10, it is that, as valiant as our efforts to do things for Jesus may be, the “better portion” is simply being with him, at his feet (Luke 10:42). What would it look like for you to prioritize *being with Jesus* in 2026?

The *radical “withness”* of the Incarnation often fails to amaze us. But as you close out the Christmas season and look to the New Year, allow yourself to be struck by what has been called “the sheer strangeness of Christianity” (Tom Holland, *Dominion*) — the strangeness that the God who calls the stars by name and bids the sun to rise entered the darkness of our world by becoming an infant in the womb of a virgin; a king born in the first century version of a Cracker Barrel parking lot by the interstate. If you feel flat this January, or perhaps a little tired of all the fuss of Christmas — if you feel distant from God, and unsure of what to do with the idea of simply *being with God*, I have one suggestion for you: allow the strangeness of it all to flood your imagination. It was that strangeness flooding the imagination of St. Augustine that gave him cause to write:

*Man’s maker was made man,
that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His
mother’s breast;
that the Bread might hunger,
the Fountain thirst,
the Light sleep,
the Way be tired on its journey;
that the Truth might be accused of false witness,
the Teacher be beaten with whips,
the Foundation be suspended on wood;
that Strength might grow weak;
that the Healer might be wounded;
that Life might die.*



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WELCOME NEW COMMUNICANTS & MEMBERS!



Beckett Aldred, Hinton Liddell, Leighton Liddell, Ann Russell Norris,
Carey Norris, Finn Pace, Vaughn Roberts, George Tullos



Paul & Carley Aehnlich
Erin



Sue Bush



Austin & Amye Lovitt
Harrison, Sydney, & Lewis



Thomas Modhu



Conner Morrow



Branson Mroz



Christy Mroz



Dan & Ashton Parker
Beau, Max, & Bennett



Scott & Greer Stanley
Dennis & Louis



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