

SERMON NOTES
Philippians 2:1-11
“Incarnational Descending”

Intro:

Peacocks are not the only birds or animals that proudly display their glory to impress others

-other birds and animals and frogs puff themselves up to give the appearance of being more than what they really are

-At least peacocks have something of real beauty to display

Human beings are not so different

-not only do we enjoy displaying what we do have, but our need to impress others also leads to engaging in certain behaviors that are calculated to make us appear to be more than what we are

Isn't that one of the primary uses of credit?

-we use material things to display our success in the world - *and if our income isn't sufficient to give us enough bright, colorful plumage to show off* -- then we use credit to live above our means and make a better impression

- And we want to know how our plumage compares with the plumage of others
- *Now I know about as much about chickens as I do about sunflowers* -- but I am told that if you take 10 chickens and put them in a pen together with some feed, after a few brief skirmishes they will establish a Pecking Order
- *The Pecking Order gives Chicken Number One the right to peck at and intimidate any other chicken // When pecked by Chicken Number One, Number Two can take out its frustration by bullying Number Three or Six or Nine // Then there's poor Number Ten who has a pretty miserable life: Pecked with no one to peck*
- *Humans have their pecking order as well*
- Whether at sporting events or parties or class reunions or family picnics: *Where do you work? How much does your company do in sales? How many people work under you? Where do you live? What are you driving these days?*

Nearly all of us look at other people=s professions, educations, wardrobes, cars and homes - and try to figure out where they fit in the Pecking Order

- The Pecking Order is not just a mind game – it affects how we treat one another
- *In the business world – and sometimes in the church – we treat those above us in the Pecking Order with honor, respect and deference while expecting the same from those below us*
- *When someone above us asks for a favor – he gets it*
- When someone below us asks for a favor or needs some help with a problem – we may or may not be inclined to make the effort to help

This Pecking Order is nothing new – James described it back in the 1st century church:

James 2:1 ¹Dear brothers, how can you claim that you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, if you show favoritism to rich people and look down on poor people?

- *Do we rejoice as much when a van load of children or youth from Mt. Joy come to church as when a new family who just bought a new home in west Eldridge visits our church?*
- *Not only is it human nature for the Pecking Order to affect the way we treat people – it is also human nature to want to ascend to a higher spot in the Pecking Order*
- *In each human heart is a built-in compass needle pointing north – upward – aspiring to advancement and upward mobility and promotion and more money and more power and more popularity and more success*
- *This nearly universal **will to ascend** is what makes following Christ so countercultural*
- ***The way of the world is to ascend into greatness and success and significance – whereas the way of following the Incarnate Christ is to DESCEND into greatness***

I. THE DESCENT OF CHRIST'S INCARNATION

- Bill Hybels (“Descending into Greatness”):

“The greatest reason for believing in the power of downward mobility is the example of Christ. The one worthy of all worship and the source of all power was born as a helpless baby in a dirty animal stable. Once his life on earth began, Jesus never stopped descending. Omnipotent, he cried; the owner of all things, he had no home. The King of kings, he became a bondservant; the source of truth, he was found guilty of blasphemy; the Creator, he was spit on by the creatures; the giver of life, he was crucified naked on a cross. With his death, his descent was complete – from the pinnacle of praise in the universe to the ultimate debasement and torture of death on a cross. Jesus Christ descended into God’s greatness.”

- **Philippians 2:6-8** Who (Christ), although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
- *This is Paul’s description of the Incarnation – The Word becoming flesh – God the Son descending from heaven to earth in human flesh*

- The Deity of Christ is clearly stated: ***Existing in the form of God***
- The word for “form” is *morphe* – referring to the essential nature and attributes as shown in the form
- **Before being born in Bethlehem – the Son of God existed eternally in the form of God – possessing all the attributes of Deity – and appearing to those in heaven as fully Divine**
- *When the Word became flesh – Jesus Christ was the visible image of the invisible God*
- ***But to exist in the form of God is an even stronger statement than to be in the image of God***
- *Adam and Eve were created in the image of God – reflecting the likeness of God in their perfect humanity before the Fall*
- **But Adam and Eve never existed in the form of God – Adam and Eve were never divine in their essential attributes**
- Jesus Christ was – and is – divine in his essential nature
- *Jesus Christ the Son of God existed eternally in the form and substance of God – possessing the very nature and essence of Deity*
- ***He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped***
- What was Christ’s attitude toward his equality with God?
- *He did not consider it “something to be grasped” – a notoriously difficult phrase to interpret using a word used only here in the Greek NT*
- *Sometimes the word in secular Greek can mean robbery – or sometimes a prize or windfall – or sometimes an advantage*
- I believe the meaning in this verse is best conveyed this way: ***Because Christ was in very nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be exploited***
- The meaning is **not** that Christ was grasping for or seeking to obtain by robbery or force an equality with God that he did not possess – *rather that equality with God was something he already possessed but did not exploit for his own advantage*
- Specifically – the Son of God did not exercise his divine sovereignty as Lord of heaven and earth as a divine right – *but rather he accepted His destiny as the Incarnate Suffering Servant -- the humiliated and crucified One* – and was declared to be Lord only after his humble obedience to the death of the Cross
- *He did not choose to exercise His Lordship as a divine right* – rather He chose the path of descending -- the humiliation and suffering of the Incarnation – being obedient to the Father’s will all the way to the Cross – *and then God exalted Jesus to his true Lordship after his saving mission was complete*
- ***He made himself nothing or of no reputation*** – literally, ***he emptied himself***
- The question is: *emptied himself of what? And how?*

- When the Word became flesh – Jesus Christ did not empty himself of his essential divine nature – **he remained fully God even as he became man**
- *Yet clearly the Jesus of Nazareth that was seen by men in human flesh was not of the same divine splendor and glory and majesty as was seen and worshiped by the angels in heaven*
- Some emptying – voluntary divesting -- had to occur in order for the Son of God to descend to earth and live as a fully human being
- *In becoming human, the Son of God voluntarily took upon himself the limitations of living within the dimensions of time and space as well as a limiting of his knowledge and power – though his knowledge and power still exceeded that of any ordinary man*
- ***The Incarnation is all about Descent and Limitation and Downward Mobility – descending from heaven to earth // from being worshiped in the form of God to suffering in the form of a human slave // moving from up to down //***
- *In the Incarnation we see the Infinite in a womb // the Divine Glory in a barn // The Creative Intelligence and Power that created the heavens and the earth manifest in the form of a helpless baby*
- ***Christ emptied himself and limited himself in the Incarnation***
-Thus the One who existed in the form of God, without losing his essential divine nature, took our full humanity upon Himself
- ***He took the form of a servant***
- *Always existing in the form of God – He took the form of a servant when he came to earth from heaven*
- *The word form is the same as in verse 6 – morphe – meaning that his humanity was as real as his deity*
- ***Without losing his essential nature as God – He took a fully human nature into Himself***
- *The Son of God has always been divine – the Son of God became human 2000 years ago while remaining divine – **God the Son became the God-Man when he was born of the virgin Mary***
- *Always God – **The Word become flesh // Always the Son of God – the Word became the Son of Mary without ceasing to be God***
- *Paul could have said that Christ took the form of a man – but he went even further than that: **He took the form of a servant***
- *The word is “doulos” – it means slave*
- *This is radical*
- *Paul is not merely saying that the Son of God became a man who had a servant attitude and frequently did acts of service for other people*
- ***He took the form of a slave – that is – just as his essential nature was that of God – so also in His Incarnation, his essential nature was that of a slave***

- What are the essential attributes of a slave?
- *A slave is best defined by what he is deprived of: NO FREEDOM // NO INDEPENDENCE // NO RIGHTS*
- The very things most Americans cherish the most – freedom / independence / individual rights – *these are the things slaves do not have*
- ***He emptied Himself – made Himself nothing – taking the very nature and form of a slave – giving up all his rights***
- ***Being made in the likeness of men // Being found in appearance as a man***
- Paul in no way is undermining by his choice of words here the full and real humanity of Jesus Christ
- *The eternal and pre-existent Son of God came down to earth from heaven and took a human form – the form of a slave – and by all outward appearances was truly a man in a human body*
- Yet he was also more than a mere man – for even in his human form he remained a divine being – *God in human form – that is the meaning of Incarnation*
- Thus Paul says that he was made in the likeness of men and was found in appearance as a man – meaning that he looked like a real man – and was in fact a real man, but he was also more than a mere man – ***being also equal with God***
- ***He humbled himself***

When we think of the humility of Christ, we think of his birth in an animal stable because there was no room in the inn at Bethlehem

-But even if Jesus had been born in a palace or a mansion - that still would have been an act of incredible humility

Jesus left the glory and purity and joys of heaven in order to live as a man amidst our sin, disease, death, poverty and injustice

--The lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth was much closer to that in the Philippines or Mexico or Nepal or Moldova today than to what we enjoy here in Eldridge, Iowa

2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The poverty of Jesus was not just material in nature - it was the poverty of living on earth as a man compared to the riches of living in heaven as God -- Yet it was also a material poverty

- Jesus was born of Mary and Joseph who were chosen by God in part because of their lowly status and humility

- *Jesus lived among lowly people in Galilee and he focused his ministry on serving lowly people*
- The people he selected to be the key leaders of his church and the theologians of his movement – were lowly fishermen
- *And among what kinds of people did Jesus do most of his ministry?*
- The sick // the demonized // lepers // the disabled // tax collectors and prostitutes // officers of the occupying army // widows // women of ill repute // children // blind beggars //
- *Not exactly a Who's Who of the upwardly mobile of society*
- Jesus did not live as a privileged member of the upper class while making occasional forays into the environs of the poor and needy
- **When he came to earth as a man, he took the form of a slave – and he humbled himself – and lived and ministered among the down-and-outers**
- *He made himself nothing and humbled himself and lived among a bunch of nobodies and gained a reputation as a Friend of Sinners and Outcasts and other Losers*
- ***That is Incarnational Descending***

II. INCARNATIONAL MINISTRY: DESCENDING AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

- From the glory of His Father's presence, Jesus Christ entered our world as one of us – *emptying himself, humbling himself, identifying himself with us in all the traits of humanity* – and ultimately dying the death of the Cross for our salvation
- *Other than admiring and thanking Jesus for what He has done – what does Incarnational Descending have to do with us?*
- We have never existed in the form of God – we have never lived in heaven – so how can we empty ourselves and descend the way that Jesus has?
- **Jesus Christ is the In-flesh-ment of God – and we are the body of Christ**
- *During his earthly life, Jesus Christ was the visible representation of the invisible God – now Jesus is ascended to heaven and no longer visible in this world – but we are the visible body of Christ – just as Jesus was the embodiment of the Father's heart and character, so we are called to be the embodiment of Jesus Christ in the world*
- What is God the Father like? ***Look at the Son – God in a human body***
- What is Jesus Christ like? ***Look at the church – the body of Christ***
- **Jesus was the Incarnation of God – we are the body of Christ**
- ***Incarnational living as the body of Christ means manifesting the heart and character of Christ through our words and deeds just as Jesus manifested the heart and character of the Father through his words and deeds***

- We are called to relate to the sinful and needy people of the world in our day as Jesus related to the sinful and needy people of the world in his day

Translating the heart of Jesus into action so that people look at the body of Christ and see the likeness of Jesus – that is our calling as the church

- ***Incarnational Descending is an essential component of Incarnational Living***
- The self-emptying // the self-humbling // the self-limitations // the taking the form of a bondservant // the surrendering of personal rights // the obedience even unto death – *all of that is essential to Incarnational Living*
- This is clear from the context
- *Some believe that verses 6-11 were composed as an early Christian hymn exalting Christ as Incarnate and Crucified and Risen and Ascended Lord*
- That may or may not be the case – but more important is how Paul applied these truths under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit

Philippians 2:5 ⁵Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus

- *My cousin once asked me: If Christians have the mind of Christ – how come so many Christians are so poor at logical reasoning?*
- Though Christ was highly intelligent and repeatedly outwitted his religious opponents – that’s not what this verse is talking about
- *The mind of Christ here is not referring to IQ – rather the mind of Christ is referring to a mindset – an attitude based on a value system – that embraces and practices humility, servanthood, self-limitation, self-sacrifice, obedience, yielding rights and downward mobility*
- Some of you will remember the hymn: *Earthly pleasures vainly call me – I would be like Jesus; Nothing worldly shall enthrall me – I would be like Jesus.*
- Really? Do we understand what we’re saying when we sing those words?
- *What Jesus do we have in mind when we say we want to be like Jesus?*
- White, upper middle class, conservative Republican, suburban evangelical, SUV-driving, prosperous American Jesus? The Jesus who is pretty much like most of us – except maybe a little holier? *Or the Jesus of Nazareth of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?*
- How many Americans can honestly say: *Earthly pleasures vainly call me // Nothing worldly shall enthrall me* – especially two weeks before Christmas?
- **The Jesus of the NT embraces and practices humility, servanthood, self-limitation, self-sacrifice, yielding rights and downward mobility**
- *Is that the Jesus you want to be like? Downwardly mobile, Descending, Suffering Servant, heading-to-the-Cross Jesus?*

- What steps of action are you taking to practice downward mobility to get the hang of Incarnational Descending?
- *What would a church look like that was practicing Incarnational Descending?*
- Deeply ingrained in most American Christians is the assumption that we need **more** to be successful as a church: *more money // bigger facilities // more members // more programs // more workers // more activities // more technology*
- ***More is better – and we expand the Kingdom by getting bigger and better***
- *But Incarnational Descending is all about limitation*
- Whatever it means that Christ emptied himself and made himself nothing – *it certainly means that he limited himself – limited his strengths // limited his powers // limited his visible splendor*
- *He descended to our level in order to lead us to glory – he took the form of a slave – though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor – he lived among the lowly and ministered to the poor and needy and lonely and sinful*
- **What would a church look like that was practicing Incarnational Descending?**
- *You wouldn't be able to tell by looking at the size of the church or at its facilities or at its financial figures or its denominational label*
- But you would be able to tell by the makeup of the church and by the focus of its ministries
- *Churches that practice Christ-like Incarnational Descending intentionally seek to evangelize, serve, love and bring into its fellowship those who would be perceived as being lower on the world's Pecking Order*
- ***Churches that practice Christ-like Incarnational Descending reflect the heart of Jesus for those on the margins of society – orphans // widows // prisoners // aliens // refugees // immigrants // the homeless // the poor // the hungry // the sick // the disabled // the oppressed // the persecuted // sex slaves // nursing home residents // children from low-income families***
- Churches that practice Christ-like Incarnational Descending allocate a significant portion of their financial resources and people resources and ministry programs toward reaching out to those on the margins of society – *those Jesus called the least of these*
- **The principle of Incarnational Descending shows us that the way for churches to expand the Kingdom is not by ascending – not by striving for bigger and better – *but rather by descending – by fleshing out the love and grace and compassion of Jesus among the poor and needy and down-and-outers and those on the margins of society***
- But how would a church like that attract the kind of successful people who populate the nice neighborhoods of the NS district?

- *Frankly, it wouldn't attract some rich young men and women – but then again, even Jesus lost the rich young ruler*
- **But such a church would attract some of the cream of the crop – namely, those desiring significance as much as success – and those who want to become like Jesus Christ – not the suburban American Christ found in many churches – but rather the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John**
- **Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God – we are the body of Christ**
- *In addition to coming to die on the Cross for our sins – Jesus came to show us the heart of the Father by his words and deeds*
- **When Jesus was doing ministry among the poor and the needy and outcasts – he was reflecting the heart of the Father**
- *Jesus is now ascended into heaven – and we are the body of Christ in the world*
- **When we humble ourselves and descend from our privileged position in the Pecking Order and take the form of a servant and get our hands dirty extending Christ's love to the poor, the alien, the widow, the orphan, the needy and the outcast – we are reflecting and manifesting the heart and character of Jesus in our loving actions**
- That is what Incarnational Living is all about
- **That is what being the body of Christ is all about**
- *That is why mission trips to Moldova and Reynosa and New Orleans – and ministries such as Urban Edge and Sonshine Community Ministries are so valuable to our church – they help us to be the body of Christ*

III. INCARNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP: DESCENDING IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

- *Incarnational living and descending are not just about outreach – but also about fellowship in the body*

Philippians 2:1-4 ¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ²make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

- Greek readers would not be able to miss the many forms of the word for “mind” in these verses:
- Vs. 2 – *being of the same mind* – and – *of one mind*

- Vs. 3 – *lowliness or humility of mind*
- Vs. 5 – *have this mind in you which also was in Christ*
- **The same mindset of Christ that motivates us to practice downward mobility in reaching out to the poor and the needy – that same mindset also enables us to experience unity in the fellowship of the church by being of one mind and purpose as we practice humility of mind toward one another**

Pride is one of the most divisive forces in any organization

-it is pride that causes people to insist that they are right and that everyone who disagrees with them must be wrong

-it is pride that causes people who have been offended to insist on waiting for the offending party to make the first move and grovel in the dirt a while before there can be any reconciliation

-it is pride that causes people to refuse to admit when they are wrong

-it is pride that causes people to mask their weaknesses and struggles while magnifying their strengths and achievements

-it is pride that provokes power struggles and feuds as people promote their own interests and preferences and agenda at the expense of others

--it is pride that causes people to show favoritism to people who are higher on the Pecking Order

- *In contrast, the mind of Christ – displayed in his Incarnational Descent – is characterized by yielding personal rights for the good of others and not insisting on one's own way*
- **It is not sameness or lack of diversity that produces unity in churches – it is the mind of Christ that produces unity**

(Conclusion):

- I have to admit that this message intimidates me
- *Do I really want to be like Jesus enough to practice Incarnational living and descending?*
- If you have been paying any attention at all – you should be feeling a little overwhelmed right now too – maybe even a little threatened – *because by global standards – most of us in this room are pretty high up on the world's Pecking Order – like the rich young ruler, we have a lot to lose in following the real Jesus of Nazareth*
- And so the honest question to ask is: *Why would we want to practice Incarnational Descending and downward mobility when everyone else around us is trying to ascend the ladder of success and move higher up the Pecking Order?*

The choice is ours - *we can live as peacocks* - displaying our own glory / striving to impress others / craving the approval of others / being obsessed with making sure that others think highly of us / ***seeking to befriend those above us while looking down on those below us in the Pecking Order*** /

// making sure that our interests are being served and our goals are being advanced and our agendas are winning the day / pursuing our own happiness and prosperity and social status and financial security

Or we can choose to grow in Christ-likeness and to grow together in maturity as the body of Christ -- *having the same mindset and attitude as that of Christ Jesus: -emptying ourselves of selfish ambition and vain conceit / humbling ourselves to live a life of servanthood and obedience to the will of the Father - caring more what God thinks of us than what others think of us // **reaching out and extending Christ's love to those on the margins of society** // working with others in our church to strive to reflect the heart and mind and character of Jesus in our words and deeds so that when people look at our lifestyles and ministry priorities and relationships – they will see the likeness of Jesus in us*

- One thing is certain after looking at this passage in Philippians: *The Incarnation and Cross of Christ show us that we are fooling ourselves if we think we can aspire to upward mobility and Christ-likeness at the same time*

Prayer

“Sweetly Broken”