John 1:1-4

Christmas is about the word *incarnation.*We sing it every year in our Christmas carols, especially in "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Charles Wesley wrote that, and one line you've sung says, "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity."

If you understand the word *incarnation,* you'll understand what Christmas is about. The idea that God took on human flesh.

Where do we go to understand what Christmas is? The first two verses of our text give us the teaching of Christmas, and the second two give us the purpose of Christmas.

Let's take a look at the first two verses. We see here the teaching of Christmas is two things. It's doctrinal, and it's boldly historical. We have to grasp this before we move on to how it changes our lives.

What do I mean by "doctrinal"? A doctrine is a belief we base our lives on, and it's something we contend for, we insist on. In other words, a doctrine first of all is a faith position. It's not something we can prove scientifically. It's not something we prove empirically. Secondly, it's something we live on, we commit ourselves to, we base our lives on. And thirdly, it's something we push, we contend with other people over. That's a doctrine. And even though we shouldn't be doctrinaire, we are all doctrinal.

Everybody has faith assumptions about God, about eternity, about human nature, about moral truth. We bet our lives on them and press for them, and there's no way to avoid being doctrinal.

Christmas is frankly doctrinal. The text says the invisible has become visible, the incorporeal has become corporeal. In other words, God has become human. The absolute has become particular. The ideal has become real. The divine has taken up a human nature. This is not only a specific doctrine, but it's also unique. Doctrine always distinguishes you. One of the reasons we're afraid to talk about doctrine is because it distinguishes us from others. Here's why the doctrine of Christmas is unique.

*On the one hand you've got religions that say God is so imminent in all things that incarnation is normal. If you're a Buddhist or Hindu, God is imminent in everything. God is the divine spark in everything, and therefore incarnation is normal. On the other hand, the family of religions like Islam and Judaism says God is so transcendent over all things that incarnation is impossible. Jesus as God is blasphemous.*

But Christianity is unique. It doesn't say incarnation is normal, but it doesn't say it's impossible. It says God is so imminent that it is possible, but he is so transcendent that the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is a , , , event. Christianity has a unique view on this that sets it apart from everything else.

**Christmas is boldly historical**

Christmas is not just frankly doctrinal; it's also boldly historical. Look at what John says: We saw it. We heard it. Our own eyes, our own ears. We felt it, this eternal Life.

Here's what he's saying: When we give you these accounts of Jesus walking on the water, of Jesus rising from the dead, of Jesus speaking these words, these are not legends. These are not things we made up. These are not wonderful spiritual parables. These are things we saw. We saw him do this. We heard him do this. We felt him do this.

In other words, the doctrine of Christmas is that God became historical. The manger, the resurrection, the story of Jesus is not just a story. It's true. It actually happened in history. And when we understand this, four things happen, and we find them in verses three and four.

**Christmas makes you deeply mystical**

Verses 3 and 4 tell us that if you grasp this idea—not that Christmas is a sweet story but that Jesus Christ came to earth, God became flesh and lived the life you should have lived, died the death you should have died, as a Savior, not just as a teacher or an example—then Christmas will do four things to you. It will make you deeply mystical, happily material, fiercely relational, and free to be emotional.

First of all, Christmas will make you deeply mystical. First John 1:3 says, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son." This word *fellowship,*which is *koinonia*, means that if Jesus Christ has come, if Christmas is true, then we've got a basis for a personal relationship with God. God is no longer a remote idea or just a force we cower before, but we can know God personally. God has become graspable.

Here's the point. If Jesus Christ is actually God come in the flesh, you're going to know much more about God. God is going to be somebody you can relate to. You're seeing him weep. You're seeing him upset. You're seeing him cast down. You're seeing him exalted. If Jesus is who he says he is, we have an autobiography from God, in a sense. And our understanding will be vastly more personal and specific than any philosophy or religion could give us.

Christmas is an invitation to become mystical. Christmas is an invitation to know Christ personally. Christmas is an invitation by God to say: Look what I've done to come near to you. Now draw near to me. I don't want to be a concept; I want to be a friend. I want to be known.

**Christmas makes you happily material**

Greek and Roman readers of this verse would have been astonished when John said he felt the eternal, he saw the eternal. Greeks and Romans and even traditional religious people today believe matter is bad; divine is good. The divine would not come down. Traditional religion says salvation is escaping out of this world into the kingdom of God, but the gospel of Christmas is that salvation is the kingdom of God coming into this world.

Matter is important. This world is important. He took on physical flesh. Therefore, Christians know in the name of Christ we share our faith, but in the name of Christ we also help a poor person get a decent house. That's part of testifying to the gospel of Christmas. The kingdom of God is here to rehabilitate this world, not to save us out into some kind of ethereal paradise. The future of traditional religion is paradise. The future of the gospel is a new heaven, a new earth.

**Christmas makes you fiercely relational**

Thirdly, not only does the gospel of Christmas make us deeply mystical and happily material, but it makes us fiercely relational. The Incarnation imprints on us an attitude toward relationships. Jesus says, I want fellowship with you.

When two people are different culturally and linguistically, how are they going to have a relationship? One must learn the other's language, speak in a broken dialect, and become vulnerable and weak. If you enter into another person's world you become weak; the other person keeps the power. But then you have a relationship.

If you follow the way of Jesus you say, "I will not work so much on being understood but on understanding. I will not work so much on getting my needs met but on meeting needs. I will work on entering into her or his world and giving that person what they consider love, not what I consider love." Incarnation, if it's imprinted in you, if you see what Jesus Christ has done, its going to make you better at personal relationships.

**Christmas makes you free to be emotional**

Look at verse 4. John says: I want you to have fellowship with us. I want you to believe what we are saying. I want you to understand the doctrine of Christmas. I want us to be united in a community. I want us to be united in belief.

And then he says: I'm doing all this—why?—so my joy will be complete.

He doesn't say: I need your lives to be okay so I can have any joy at all. He's already got joy. He says: You need to get your act together for my joy to be complete. There's a balance there. He's got a joy no matter what they do. Christmas gives you a subterranean joy.

On the one hand, Christmas gives you a subterranean river of joy, and no matter how bad it is on the surface, no matter how bad circumstances are, the joy is always there. It keeps you green. It keeps you fresh. After all, Jesus Christ has landed. The Lord has opened a cleft in the pitiless walls of the world, and the kingdom of God is coming, come hell or high water. That's subterranean joy.

But on the other hand, John says: I can't have complete joy unless you believe. That means this. Many of us are afraid to enmesh ourselves in the lives of other people, because we can't stand the idea of tying our hearts to other people. If they're unhappy, we're unhappy. So we pull back. We withdraw. We don't get involved in the lives of people. But the Incarnation means that Jesus Christ, God himself, got enmeshed in our brokenness. He got involved in a major way. He was weeping. He came in and he fell, and he had nails in his hands.

But here's what's great. It's a subterranean joy. It's a joy that cannot go out, and it will give you the freedom to get involved in the lives of other people. Christmas makes you free to be emotional. It makes you realize the emotion of grief is not going to take you all the way down, because you have a subterranean joy.

If you believe the doctrine of Christmas, it makes you deeply mystical. It makes you happily material. It makes you fiercely relational. It makes you free to be emotional. What else could you want? Think about that the next time you say to somebody, "Have a merry Christmas."