

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Christmas Eve

John 1:1-14

"He Came Down"

Most of us love singing Christmas carols. I remember that love began for me when I was about 11 years old. I attended a classic English school, as my father had 30 years earlier, which was founded in 1721 "for the poor boys of the town." It was now a state-run school, but kept its Anglican roots - one teacher was a clergyman; the Chair of the Governors was the Rector of the local church. So every Christmas 400 boys straggled down the road in our school uniforms from the school to the parish church of St. Peter & St. Paul for the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols.

If you know that service, perhaps in its BBC-broadcast version from King's College, Cambridge, you know it begins with an unaccompanied boy soprano singing the first verse of *Once In Royal David's City*. I was never the soloist, but I can still feel what it was like to sit in the soprano section listening to that clear voice in a lofty church, and how the whole choir tensed to see if he would make those four high-Ds on the names *Mary* and *Jesus* in the 1st verse! Magical and ethereal as that was, my strongest memory is as the 2nd verse begins: the choir and organ (but not yet the congregation) join in: "*He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all...*" Those first three powerful notes, with the descending line sung by the tenors, meant "*He came down..*" was graven into my heart and soul forever.

"He came down." That is the center of the Christmas story. In his Gospel, John said it this way: "*The Word... who was with God in the beginning, and who was God... became flesh and came to live among us...*" (Jn 1). The Apostle Paul said it even more emphatically: "*Jesus Christ... being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to grasp/hold on to/, but made himself nothing/emptied himself/, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness... and humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross"* (Phil 2).

He came down. What does that mean to you and me? That Christmas is not a sentimental story about no room at the inn, a baby in a manger, angels and shepherds and stars and wise men; it is about God coming down to us. And that touches us, because "down" is where we live. This year I don't need to belabor that point, I know. This has been a "down" year, and next year will be worse. When the government is done bailing out mortgage companies and investment banks and auto manufacturers, we shall still have state and local governments, towns and school districts, and every business on Main St. to bail out! And many people are going to lose their jobs. Half a million did already in November.

But our national problems are more than just financial, as we all know. Something in the

system is broken, and needs much more than freshly printed money thrown at it. As Thomas Friedman wrote last week in his NY Times column (called *The Great Unraveling*) "We don't just need a financial bailout, we need an ethical bailout." We have been frantically pursuing the wrong goals, and now a bitter payment has come due. And of course the "downside" is much more than financial; those of us who live on the affluent North Shore of Long Island, NY ought to know that better than anyone. Our families, however well off, are not exempt from the downside of life: disease, divorce, depression, drugs, death, all happen here too!

Of course our lives are full of wonderful things, especially at Christmas, when we spend time with families and friends, exchange gifts, feast together! But in the midst of that joy, in some homes there is heartache over a missing loved one, or an errant child, or a devastating diagnosis, or a lost job. The joke of a few months ago that our "401(k)" pension plans had become "301(k)"s has turned sour now that they are more like "201(k)s"...

But by now, some of you are asking "Why is he being so negative, why all this gloom on Christmas Eve?" As someone said in response to our church survey earlier this year, "I want to feel uplifted for the week ahead... church should inspire." Well here is the answer: *He Came Down*. The heart of the Christmas message, and of the Christian message, is that *He Came Down*. God does not say to us "climb up to meet me, and if you get high enough, I will greet you and welcome you." He says "I'm coming down to where you are. In fact I am coming further down than you can imagine - not just living your life, but dealing with your pains, your diseases and disputes and betrayals, dying your death, and even (as the older versions of the Apostle's Creed say) 'descending into

hell' for you. You don't have to climb up, I am coming down."

Here is the great paradox at the heart of Christian faith: you do not have to be good enough to please God, you have to be humble enough to accept his forgiveness and his deliverance. And you find those things "at the bottom." Only when you have gone down, down, down, as he did, do you realize that *down* is where you meet God - in the low place, in the humble place, in the broken place. In Christianity, *the way down is the way up; to be low is to be high*.

Jesus said to the people "*Blessed are you poor, you humble, you who weep... you will be satisfied*" (Lk 6:20-21). His mother Mary understood this before he was born: she praised God that "*he has put brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble; he has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty.*" (Lk 1:52-53). To his own disciples, Jesus said "*The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... but it shall not be so among you! Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant*" (Mt 20:25-26). "*When you go to a feast, take the lowest seat; then the host may come and say to you 'Friend, move up to a higher place.' For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*" (Lk 14:10-11).

Here is a truth that any modern 12-Step program will teach you: you must begin at the bottom, where you will meet God. An old Puritan prayer said it this way: "Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly... let me learn the paradox that the way down is the way up; that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart... that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive..." (*The Valley Of Vision*).

Because Jesus "came down;" "went down" to the lowest place, to death on a cursed cross,

Paul the Apostle says *"Therefore... God exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name above every other name..."* (Phil 2). In God's kingdom, there is a necessary connection between being down and being exalted. And in the strange providence of God, we in our generation are being given another chance to learn that. *We* are going down, perhaps further down than any generation has done since the 1930s! We will have much to learn. Here's a LI resident who lost his job at Morgan Stanley a couple of months ago: *"It's been a humbling experience,"* but through it *"I found a deeper sense of God's authority over everything... I feel him walking with me."* (*NY Times*, Dec 13).

In the valley, at the bottom, we can meet God, *and* we can meet one another. Recall the paradox the Puritan poet invoked: *"to give is to receive."* When we have gone down, paradoxically we become more ready to share what we have with people who already have much less. We will need to relearn that solidarity, that care for one another in the face of difficulty. If you've ever seen interviews with soldiers or Marines in combat, you know that they are almost never fighting for the great cause, they are fighting for their own buddies, for the safety of their platoon; they are fighting for *one another*. So it should be among us - we are so bound together by our common humanity and by our faith that we do what we can to help one another. In Christianity, *"to give is to receive, and the way down is the way up."*

What has all this to do with Christmas Eve? He came down. *"He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all. And his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall."* The Christmas story is *God's graphic*, the image he has chosen to make vivid to us the truth that *"he came down."* The image of the stable sticks in our mind to illustrate the words: He came *down*.

Wherever you go from here tonight, next week, next year: however far you go down in your finances or your family life - remember that as you go down, you can meet God, because he is there at the bottom to greet you. You cannot go down further than he has gone. At the end of WWII, the Dutch hero Corrie Ten Boom, whose family had sheltered Jews and then paid the price in Nazi prison camps, wrote that she had learned in Buchenwald that *"There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."*

He came down. That's what all those lights and decorations are about, all the gift-giving and feasting! And that's what the stable - the Nativity, the crèche - are for: to remind us, every time we see them, that he came down. So every Nativity scene you see this Christmas - on cards, outside churches, in peoples homes- say to yourself: *"that's what it means: I don't have to climb up to God; he came down!"*

Let us pray...