

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Are you the One who was meant to be Master?” This is the question asked in the Christmas anthem “Baby, What You Goin’ A Be?” by the late Natalie Sleeth, and it is the question asked of Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist. Of course, John’s disciples were asking this to an adult Jesus while John was imprisoned and, as we know, soon to be the source of the saying, “head on a silver platter.”

Interesting, isn’t it, that the question of a loving parent is also the question of faithful disciples.

What parent of a newborn child—any child, really—doesn’t ask this question. What is my child going to be? Butcher, baker, candlestick maker? Doctor, professor, pastor? Pro athlete, stay-at-home-dad, soldier? It’s probably *the* question asked by all parents, with the possible exception of, “What in the world were you thinking?!”

As we proceed through Advent, we are greeted this Sunday with lessons that point us toward the birth of the Messiah, by reference of one to come in Isaiah and explicitly in the use of the Magnificat in lieu of the psalm. We also have the message of John’s disciples, pointing to Jesus as flesh and blood adult rabbi, and from James we have the reminder of the Second Advent, when Christ will come in judgment to rule the heavens and the earth. All four of the readings really do answer the question of the disciples of John to Jesus, don’t they?

Advent is not the time we use to prepare for Jesus’ birthday, nor is Christmass—and I do prefer to spell that with two “s’s” because this is truly the Mass of Christ—a reason to have a birthday party for Jesus. Rather, this is an important time to prepare for the Incarnation of God. The birth of Jesus is historic in human history. At no time, before or since, has God—or the little-g god of any other faith—chosen to be manifest as one of His own created beings. This is radical thing, and we Christians give it way to little importance in our lives and faith. God, our Creator, chose to become one of His own created human beings, and He chose to do that through the service of one, very special young lady—Mary.

Mary tells of being the servant of God, and thus doing God's service. Let's consider what really *isn't* God's service. Just coming to church on Sunday morning is not serving God. Simply playing the organ in worship is not serving God. Simply lighting candles or lifting the bread and wine in prayer is not serving God. These actions *might* be serving God, but the only true servant of God, as Luther so simply puts it in his commentary on the Magnificat, is one who "lets Him be his God and perform His works in him."¹

To be God's servant is to let God do His work in and through one's self, *while letting God be one's God*. That is, just because we go through the public motions associated with the Christian faith, if we are unwilling to let God into our lives and let go of the controls, so that God might work through us, we are simply going through the motions, and *not* doing God's work.

When God decided to take upon Himself human form and become incarnate, He could have simply floated down from heaven or appeared suddenly in the holy of holies of the temple when the chief priest entered for his annual visit at Yom Kippur. After all, would that have made the point? Think about it. The chief priest would enter into the holiest place in all Judaism and offer a sacrifice for himself and his people to the One True God, who was believed to sit in the mercy seat, between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. The chief priest slides the curtain open and there, unlike anytime before in human history, would be sitting God Almighty, ready to have a little chat with the priest.

"Shalom, Caiaphas. Nice to see you here. Can we talk?"

Show of hands—how many would know what to say in response to that opener?

And what if God had done this? Would it have made a difference? After all, God had made Himself known and visible to Adam and Eve, Noah, and Moses, and folks didn't listen and behave themselves for very long thereafter. And, what then would make God any different—in the eyes of

¹Martin Luther, vol. 21, *Luther's Works, Vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther's Works, 21:350 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1956)

the nonbeliever—than the pantheon of gods worshipped by the Greeks, Romans, and countless other non-Judeo-Christian communities? These other traditions are filled with examples of one god or another showing up among the mere mortals.

No, God knew that He, and He alone, had to make His point perfectly clear to the people by doing something only He could do. For God to make it clear and obvious that He loved His creation, and wanted the best for them, God had to do something that no one else could do or claim to do—become one of His own creation. Indeed, to become incarnate—to take on human bodily form, literally to take on flesh or to be “in flesh.” And, just for good measure, God chooses to become incarnate by birth through a virgin—again, something that nothing else can do—and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, God becomes one with His creation, but never gives up His divinity, either.

Dear friends, we don't make a big enough deal about the Incarnation. It is more than just celebrating the birth of a cute, bouncing baby Jewish boy. It is God doing something so great, so powerful to show how much He loves His people.

If God had not taken on human form, but simply showed up in the Holy of Holies, how might He have ended up on the Cross, as the final sacrifice for all people. Indeed, it was the act of the chief priest that put Jesus on the Cross as that sacrifice, but would Caiaphas have crucified God after seeing Him in the mercy seat? Highly, highly doubtful. So without the sacrifice of the Son of God on the Cross, we would still be relying on the sacrifices of a chief priest, and other priests, to atone for our day-to-day sinfulness.

So, the only way God could ensure the salvation and reconciliation of His people with Him was to take on human form, come into the world in a way the people would understand—as a baby boy, first-born of a Jewish family—live, work, grow, and teach among those same people, and yes, allow Himself to be arrested, tried, convicted, and executed in the most horrific way. Only by becoming incarnate—in the flesh—could God accomplish the task that was necessary for the salvation of His people.

So we who have been baptized in that death and resurrection have received the promised salvation. We share in the bread and wine which are the True Body and Blood of Christ as yet another visible sign of God's love and grace for us.

On Christmass morn, we received God Incarnate into the world and into our lives. At the Table we receive God Incarnate into our lives through bread and wine and the power of the Holy Spirit. Our challenge, then, is to let God work in and through us now that He is here. That is what it means to be a servant of God. Amen.