

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
December 18, 2017

God with Us!
John 1:14

As we turn our attention today to the meaning and message of Christmas, I would remind you that in past years I have often looked at John 1:14 and what it tells us about the first coming or first advent of Jesus Christ. You've heard me say on several occasions that, in my humble opinion, John 1:14 is the most amazing and breath-taking verse in the entire Bible. When I say that, I have particularly in mind the opening declaration that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14a). It stretches the limits of our capacity as human beings to grasp the implications of this.

To say that he who is and always has been infinite *Spirit* has now become "*flesh*" is almost more than I can handle. How do we explain that he who is *infinite God* became *finite man*? How are we supposed to make sense of the idea that the God who is omnipresent, that is to say, the God who fills the galaxies with his immeasurable being entered into the womb of a teen-aged Jewish girl and experienced the process of gestation for nine months? ***How does the pure, righteous, holy, omnipotent, omniscient, majestic God of the universe become human "flesh" in all its weakness and limitations, all the while remaining God?*** This is truly the most amazing assertion in the Bible, at least as far as I'm concerned.

But today I want us to look briefly at yet another assertion in this passage, an assertion or statement that I suspect most people never think about or lose sleep trying to understand. It's a statement that typically gets lost in between the declaration that "the Word became flesh" and the statement that "we have seen his glory." I'm talking about that phrase: "***and dwelt among us.***"

Have you ever paused to consider what is being said? Perhaps you have, and your conclusion wasn't all that exciting. "O.K.," you say, "God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, became a human being and *lived on the earth* just like every other human being. What's so special about that? After all people 'dwell' all over the earth." What's the big deal? The fact of the matter is that it is a massively big, dare I say, unfathomable deal!

As you will shortly see, when John declares that the Word who became flesh "dwelt" among us he's not saying the same thing that I say when I tell you that I "dwell" on Kirkland Ridge in Edmond or that my mother "dwells" on McCasland Parkway in Duncan. Here in John 1:14 there is something in this word "dwelt" that is incredibly rich and spiritually thick and theologically profound.

We catch a bit of a glimpse into what John means by remembering what the angel said to Joseph when he appeared to him in a dream: "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name 'Immanuel' (which means God with us)" (Matt. 1:23). So I ask again, does that mean nothing more than that Jesus would be "with" us in the same way that I am "with" you today, or the way in which you are "with" me present in this room? If that is all that the angel had in mind, I can't help but wonder why he went to such great lengths to highlight that fact.

So, what precisely does it mean to say that the Word of God who became flesh "***dwelt*** among us"? In what sense is "God ***with*** us" simply because Jesus is present?

That's actually a very good question that leads to nothing short of a life-changing, history-transforming answer. So let me explain. To help you understand the meaning of this statement and how it affects our celebration of Christmas, I need to take you back into the Old Testament.

The "Shekinah" Glory of God

The starting point for understanding this crucial concept is the Old Testament narrative in which we find the visible manifestation of the splendor of God among his people, the *shekinah* of God, his majestic and radiant glory without which the Israelites would have been left in the darkness that characterized the Gentile world.

The question that plagued the hearts and minds of the Jewish people from the time of their emergence from the loins of Abraham was: *where is God, how might we know him, are we allowed to see him, what must we do to hear his voice, are we allowed to draw near to him and if so, under what terms or conditions?*

The story begins soon after God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. God led them into the wilderness and gave instructions to Moses that he was to oversee the construction of a *tent or mobile tabernacle*. It was there, in that tabernacle, that God would come, dwell with, and meet his people. *“Let them make me a sanctuary,”* the Lord spoke to Moses, *“that I may dwell in their midst”* (Ex. 25:8).

When instructions were given for the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, we read in Exodus 25:21-22 – “And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. ***There I will meet with you,*** and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, ***I will speak with you*** about all that I give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”

Note closely: it was on the mercy seat, atop the Ark of the Covenant, where God would *“meet”* with his people and *“speak”* with them.

It was there that “the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and [there that] the Lord would speak with Moses” (Ex. 33:9). It was there that “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 40:34). The tabernacle was where the people of Israel would draw near to hear from God, to worship God, and to stand in his presence (cf. Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10).

What was true of the tabernacle during the days of Israel’s sojourn was even more the case in the temple of Solomon. When the Ark of the Covenant was brought “to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim” (2 Chron. 5:7), “the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for ***the glory of the Lord filled the house of God***” (2 Chron. 5:14).

The Word “Dwelt” Among Us

It is against this preparatory backdrop that we read the stunning declaration of John that “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). The word translated “dwelt” in your English Bible is not the normal word for “to live among” or “abide” in a particular location. The verb *skenoō* literally means “to pitch a tent” or “to live in a tabernacle” and unmistakably points back to the OT when God’s glory took up residence in the tent of Moses, the portable tabernacle, and eventually in Solomon’s temple.

John is not merely describing the coming of Christ. He is not simply saying that Jesus walked on the earth. His point is far more than the simple assertion that he was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. He wants us to understand that this is not simply a reference to Jesus living among other people, rubbing shoulders with them, or “dwelling” in a home or spending time on the streets. This “dwelling” among us is of far, far greater spiritual significance.

John’s point is that God has now chosen to dwell with his people in a yet more personal way, in the Word who became flesh: in Jesus! ***The Word, Jesus of Nazareth, is the true and ultimate embodiment of the shekinah glory of God, the complete and perfect manifestation of the presence of God among his people. The place of God’s glorious dwelling is the flesh of his Son!*** The glory which once shined in the tent/tabernacle/temple of old, veiled in the mysterious cloud, was simply *a foreglow, a mere anticipatory flicker*, if you will, of that exceedingly excelling glory now embodied in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ (cf. Col. 1:19).

This truth is confirmed by Jesus himself in John 2. There we read the story of how Jesus denounced the money-changers in the Temple and overturned their tables. People have often referred to this as his “cleansing” of the Temple, but it would be more accurate to describe it as God’s ***judgment*** of the Temple. What Jesus did in the Temple was a prophetic preview of what was to happen in 70 a.d. when God would turn his back on the Temple and send the armies of Rome to destroy it altogether.

But back in John 2, the religious leaders challenge Jesus and ask him by what authority he is acting and what “sign” he might give that would prove his right to act in this way. Listen to his response:

“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:18-22).

Now what exactly is Jesus saying? In all likelihood, Jesus is using a *double entendre* to make his point. On one level he is referring to the destruction of the physical temple in 70 a.d. It will be destroyed and Jesus will replace it with a new temple, namely, the Church in which the Holy Spirit lives, being built on Jesus who is himself the cornerstone.

But on another level Jesus is obviously referring to his own body, which is also the temple. When his body is destroyed by being crucified, he raises it up again in three days in the resurrection. Jesus thus ***in his own person replaces the physical building of the Temple because he alone is now the center of God’s glorious indwelling presence.***

Again, we must come to grips with the striking reality that God no longer lives in a tent or tabernacle built by human hands, ***nor will he ever.*** God’s glorious manifest presence is not to be found in an ornate temple of marble, gold, and precious stones, but rather in Jesus. Jesus is the glory of God in human flesh, the one in whom God has finally and fully pitched his tent.

The point is that ***the tabernacle of the Old Covenant, and later the temple constructed by Solomon, was a type or foreshadowing of the glory of Christ.*** That structure was not an end in itself, but a symbol or type or prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus Christ! It was the place where the Law of Moses was preserved, of which Jesus is now the fulfillment. It was the place of revelation and relationship, where God met and spoke to his people.

But now we hear God and see God and meet God in Jesus. For centuries of Israel’s existence, the tabernacle and eventually the temple was the place of sacrifice, where forgiveness of sins was obtained. But today, under the New Covenant, we don’t have to undertake a long journey to a specific geographical location or to a particular building or church sanctuary in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins. For that, we now go to Jesus, regardless of where we may live, regardless of the country of our residence. Israel worshipped and celebrated in the temple in Jerusalem. We now worship in spirit and truth, regardless of geographical locale (cf. John 4:20-26).

To meet God, to talk with God, to worship God, you no longer come to a building or a tent or a structure made with human hands. You come to Jesus! Jesus is the Temple of God!

The Church, too, is the True Temple of God

But the story doesn’t end there. ***We, the church, are the body of Christ and therefore constitute the temple in which God is pleased to dwell. The shekinah glory of Yahweh now abides permanently and powerfully in us through the Holy Spirit.*** When Paul describes this in his letter to the Ephesians, he refers to Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, “in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21-22). Simply put, God’s residence is “neither a literal temple in Jerusalem nor simply heaven, but the Church, of which the Gentile Christian readers in Asia Minor were a part” (Andrew Lincoln, 158) and of which we, Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City, are a part.

This formation of the temple is an on-going divine project, a continuous process (see also Eph. 4:15-16). Although it may seem strange to speak of a “building” experiencing continuous “growth”, Paul surely wants us to conceive of the church as an ***organic*** entity. Recall that Peter also refers to believers somewhat paradoxically as “***living stones***” (1 Peter 2:5)!

Again, when Paul appeals to the Corinthians to live in holiness and unity and peace one with another he grounds his appeal in this truth: “Do you not know that ***you are God’s temple*** and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and ***you are that temple***” (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

In his plea for sexual purity, he again asks: “Or do you not know that ***your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you***, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; see also the graphic portrayal of this truth in 1 Peter 2:4-10).

All this bring us to Paul's consummate declaration in 2 Corinthians 6:16b: ***"For we are the temple of the living God!"*** To reinforce this point he combines several OT texts (Lev. 26:11-12; Isa. 52:11; Ezek. 11:17; 20:34,41; 2 Sam. 7:14) which prophesied of a coming, end-times temple, one of which is Ezekiel 37:26-27 where God declares:

"I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Ezek. 37:26-27).

Let me come straight to the point. ***Beginning with the incarnation and consummating in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, together with the progressive building of his spiritual body, the Church, God is fulfilling his promise of an eschatological temple in which he will forever dwell.***

But what of the literal, physical temple in Jerusalem? Has it lost its spiritual significance in God's redemptive purposes? To answer this we must return to Jesus' words in Matthew 23-24.

In judgment against the Jewish people, the temple complex was abandoned by our Lord, both physically and spiritually, as he departed and made his way to the Mount of Olives. "Your house," said Jesus, "is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:38). It has thus ceased to be "God's" house. When Jesus died and "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Matt. 27:51), God forever ceased to bless it with his presence or to acknowledge it as anything other than *ichabod* (the glory has departed).

Let me remind you of what took place at the time of Israel's banishment into exile in Babylon back in the 6th century b.c. Ezekiel the prophet was given a vision of the departure of God's glory out of the Temple, an expression of the judgment that was about to fall upon the people of God. We read this:

"Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city" (Ezek. 11:22-23).

So here we see the glory of God's presence withdraw from the Temple and take up his place on the Mount of Olives. This event is repeated in vivid and dramatic fashion by Jesus himself. Just as dramatically as Jesus had entered Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-17, the so-called "Triumphal Entry") and its temple, he now departs. We read in Matthew 24:1 that "Jesus left the temple and was going away" and eventually "sat on the Mount of Olives" (Matt. 24:3a). The echoes of God's withdrawal from the temple in Ezekiel's vision reverberate in the actions of Jesus himself. Just as the glory of God, in judgment, literally withdrew and abandoned the Temple in Ezekiel's day and stood on the Mount of Olives, once again, in judgment, Jesus, who is himself the glory of God embodied, literally withdraws and abandons the Temple and stands on the Mount of Olives.

The ultimate physical destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 a.d. is but the outward consummation of God's spiritual repudiation of it. Jesus has now left, never to return.

This applies equally to any supposed future temple that many believe will be built in Jerusalem in the general vicinity where the Dome of the Rock now stands. It's entirely possible, of course, that people in Israel may one day build a temple structure and resume their religious activities within it. The political and military implications of such, not to mention the religious furor it would provoke, are obvious.

Whether or not this will ever occur is hard to say, but if it does it will have no prophetic or theological significance whatsoever. The only temple in which God is now and forever will be pleased to dwell is Jesus Christ and the Church, his spiritual body.

It would be a horrible expression of the worst imaginable *redemptive regression* to suggest that God would ever sanction the rebuilding of the temple. It would be tantamount to a denial that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It would constitute a repudiation of the Church as the temple of God and thus an affront to the explicit affirmation of Paul in these many texts that I've quoted to you.

Finally, let's not lose sight of the practical point Paul is making. ***It is because we as the church are the place of God's presence in the world today that we must guard ourselves against any and every expression of idolatry.*** We are not simply another cultural institution or "social service meeting the felt needs" of our neighbors. "Instead, as the new covenant people of God, the church is the 'family of God' united by a common identity in Christ and gathered around her common worship and fear of 'the Lord Almighty'" (Scott Hafemann, 292). May our lives always reflect that glorious and gracious identity.

Not a Place, but a Person!

Once again, you need to keep in the forefront of your thinking that in the first century, when Jesus arrived on the scene, the Temple was the center of all religious and spiritual life and activity. It was the place that gave Israel its identity. But more than this, it was the place of sacrifice, where forgiveness of sins was obtained.

To understand this we need to look briefly at one of the more famous incidents in the life of Jesus. It's found in Mark 2:1-12. There we read about a paralyzed man whose four friends carry him to Jesus. Unable to make their way through the crowd, they tear a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching. They lower their friend to the ground, much to the dismay of everyone present. It is here that we pick up the narrative:

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:5-12)

There is a dimension to this story that is difficult for us in the 21st century to grasp or appreciate. But I assure you it was not lost on the scribes in that house or the people who pushed their way in to see Jesus.

As I said a moment ago, we must remember that for the Jewish people, ***the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of religious and spiritual life.*** It was in the Temple that God drew near to his people. If you wanted to experience the nearness of God, if you wanted to stand in proximity to the revelation of his glorious presence, you had to take a literal trip. No matter where you lived, you had to journey to Jerusalem. It was at the temple that the people of God worshiped. But most important of all, ***it was only in the Temple where the sacrifice for sin was made and thus the place where forgiveness was found.***

But here is Jesus, saying to this paralyzed man, and to everyone else as well, ***I am the fulfillment of the Temple. I am here to be and to do everything the Temple was and did.*** Jesus extended forgiveness of sins without sending the man to the Temple, without requiring that he perform the necessary worship or offer the blood sacrifices that were so much a part of Jewish life.

"I am the Temple," Jesus is saying. "Everything you formerly experienced there, everything you found there: whether the forgiveness of sins or the presence of God or the revelation of his glory, you now and forever after find in me!"

Simply put, this little story about men digging through a roof to get their friend to Jesus is simply ***a platform on which a much greater and far more significant story is being played out.*** This is Jesus turning the religious system on its head. This is Jesus undercutting the old and replacing it with the new. This is Jesus saying: "It's all about me. I am the Temple. I am the presence of God. I am the place of his glory. I am the source of forgiveness."

If you want forgiveness and freedom from guilt and its condemning power, you don't go to a specific place, whether that be a shrine or a building or a particular church. Neither do you go to a mere human being, be that me, your pastor, or a priest or a bishop or someone who is ordained into gospel ministry. You simply go to Jesus.

Israel worshipped and celebrated in the temple in Jerusalem. We now worship in spirit and truth, regardless of geographical locale (cf. John 4:20-26). To meet God, to talk with God, to worship God, to find forgiveness and freedom and to experience the transforming power of God, you no longer come to a building or a tent or a structure made with human hands. You come to Jesus! Jesus is the Temple of God!

Conclusion

That, to put it as simply and as gloriously as is humanly possible, is what John is saying to us in v. 14 of chapter one of his Gospel. That is what John means when he says the Word became flesh “and *dwelt* among us.” That, I would argue, is the true meaning of Christmas.

The glorious and majestic presence of God’s glory resides permanently and bodily in the person of Jesus Christ. God has come to earth in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, and has set up his tabernacle, his dwelling place in the flesh of Jesus. Jesus is the tabernacle of God’s glorious presence, the person in whom and where we find forgiveness, the person through whom we hear God speak, the person where we meet God in all his fullness and splendor.

This, then, is at the heart of the Christmas message. Jesus is the true Temple of God, the dwelling place of infinite divine glory. Come and worship!