

INVITED INTO GOD'S HOLY FAMILY: ADVENT REFLECTION
(November 30th -- Knox Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor)

Good evening! I'm Valerie Johnson, and I am delighted to share some thoughts with you tonight as we enter into the Christmas season. Perhaps as you were mingling in the Atrium, you were able to share a few stories with one another about your Christmases past. I have fond memories of caroling, baking cookies, driving around town to see holiday lights, and attending candlelight services at church.

But, probably like you, I have had some experiences at Christmas that have felt "at odds" with a season that is supposed to have a joyful, festive tone. Maybe I'm the only one who does this, but . . . sometimes I try to be the super hostess of holiday gatherings—you know, with delicious food, beautiful décor, and harmonious family interactions. Then real life intrudes. A recipe goes wrong, maybe even setting off the smoke detector in my house. The table centerpiece that I create looks nothing like the picture on the Internet. Or I'm dealing with grumpy relatives who need a nap. I'm guessing that the women in this room could tell many tales of Decembers "gone awry"—from the stress of final exams to the unpleasantness of root canals. These experiences can seem to be anything but holy. They can seem far away from the shepherds' wonder as the angels rejoiced over the coming of Jesus.

In a group this size, we could also surely find stories of Decembers that have gone awry in deeper, more tragic ways. Sometimes our experiences seem so dissonant with the "happy holidays" that we can feel like we're on the outside of the Christmas season altogether, almost as if we're peering through a window watching other people experience joy. We can feel like there is no place for us inside of it.

For me, there have been difficult Christmases related to my parents' divorce and remarriages. Years later, my infertility and miscarriages brought sadness into this time of year. My most complex experience of

Christmas happened seven years ago, when I myself was “great with child,” like Mary carrying Jesus in her womb. I had learned that my baby boy, G____, had a rare genetic disorder and would have only a very short life on earth. Nearly nine months pregnant that December, I was lumbering along in the grocery store, pushing my cart, when I heard the song over the intercom, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.” I remember stopping in my tracks and thinking, “How do I even participate in Christmas this year?” Others of you have been there, or you are there right now, experiencing great hardship. Maybe it’s depression. Or cancer. Or the loss of a loved one. You may be asking, “Is there even a place for me to belong at this time of year?”

What I have learned over the years—and what many of you may know as well—is that the story of Jesus’ birth is far more than a “holly jolly” Christmas, and involves far more emotional and spiritual complexity than a Hallmark TV special. In fact, the very season of Advent in the church calendar (basically, the four Sundays before Christmas Day) is marked as a time of waiting, anticipation, and longing for the coming, or advent, of Jesus. Advent parallels the hundreds of years of people’s waiting for a Savior, as described in the Bible. It also looks ahead to His return to complete His work of making all things new and restoring everything here on earth. So mysteriously, when the brokenness and darkness of the world overwhelms us, when we long for things to be made right, our spirits are primed to understand more fully the true meaning of Jesus’ birth.

Depending on what you’re going through right now, this year may not be the time for baking cookies or decking the halls with boughs of holly. That’s okay. But there is a place for you to experience the wonder of the coming of Jesus, even and perhaps especially if you are suffering or feeling like an outsider at this time of year. There are bigger truths at work, so wondrous and profound that they fulfill our heart’s longings in the most life-giving ways.

Tonight, I hope to help us reflect on the grand and astonishing true story of Christmas. We will focus particularly on the miracle of our being invited into God's holy family—a place to belong with our Creator Himself. We will consider the reality that Jesus, the Son of God, became human like us so that we could be adopted into His family and grow to become like Him. Let me give you some keywords, some place markers, in the meditation that I'll be sharing: Flesh. Family. And Flourishing.

FLESH: To get us started, I'd like to ask you to use your imagination to step into the nativity scene—the scene of the birth of Jesus, which we just heard from the book of Luke in the Bible. It's a chilly night in Bethlehem. The town is packed with people registering for the census. You can see oil lamplight in many of the windows of the homes as you walk past. Although the Bible doesn't clearly tell us what type of shelter Joseph and Mary dwelled in that evening, we know that there wasn't room for them in a public lodging place. We also know that they laid newborn baby Jesus in a manger, or a feeding trough, which suggests proximity to animals, which could have been in a stable, a cave, or even the lower level of a dwelling, which was used to house livestock during bad weather. So as you enter this shelter, you see a young woman who bears all the marks of having given birth, looking both exhausted and radiant, alternatively closing her eyes to rest and watching protectively over her son. Her hair may be tangled and still damp from her labor. Her cloak may be streaked with bodily fluids. You see a man next to her, doing his best to tend to her needs and looking astounded and tremendously relieved that her ordeal is over. It's a humble setting—perhaps with the smell of manure in the air, and animals braying. Strangely enough, there are some other men there, too, rough in appearance and awkwardly kneeling, maybe smelling of sweat after a day's work, with hands dirtied from tending to their sheep. Imagine their elated faces, their stumbling to find words to explain to Mary and Joseph what happened in the field and how the angels told them where to find Jesus.

And now you walk over to the feeding trough to gaze upon the newborn baby Himself. His head may be misshapen from traveling down the birth canal. He may have the hiccups; He may stretch and yawn. His parents may not know how to soothe Him when he cries. If Mary and Joseph allow you to hold him, you can feel the warmth and vulnerability of his body as you cradle him, his little fingers curling around yours.

If this exercise of the imagination is unsettling for you, there is good reason. The Bible reveals Jesus as shockingly human, dramatically expressed in his arrival as a helpless, dependent baby.

You are beholding a phenomenon that the Bible calls “Word made Flesh.” Jesus, who is called the very Word of God, takes on a human body, becoming fully human while also being fully divine. This miracle—His becoming one of us—is also known as the incarnation. God essentially sends a part of Himself—His own son—into our world, allowing us to have a sensory, physical experience with Him. Jesus is rightly called “Immanuel,” which means God with us.

It’s astounding that Jesus steps away from His royal glory to take on human flesh. What’s more, He assumes a particularly lowly human status. He is not born into wealth. Joseph—his human father—is a carpenter, later unable to afford the typical temple sacrifice at the dedication of baby Jesus. Although, according to Roman betrothal law, Mary and Joseph are technically married by the time of Jesus’ birth, the early announcement of Mary’s pregnancy threatened to create scandal, suggesting the appearance of her infidelity and Jesus’ illegitimacy. As Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before, Jesus has “no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (53:2). In all of these ways, we see that Jesus is “with us” in the humblest sense—identifying with those who are ordinary and even outcasts.

As we marvel at this God-infant lying in the manger, we need to look ahead to the man He would become. As we learn from His disciples’

eyewitness accounts, Jesus was truly divine, truly Other, beyond any human categories. He spoke and taught about God's Word with tremendous authority. He healed people, immediately discerning their deepest needs. He raised people from the dead. He claimed that He and God the Father were one. A frequent refrain from those who saw Jesus in action was "we have never seen anything like this." Yet at the same time, His disciples' accounts reveal that Jesus got tired, felt hungry and thirsty, used humor and irony, experienced loneliness, betrayal, and violation, and wept over the horrors of death. As theologian John Calvin famously said, "Christ has put on our feelings along with our flesh." He entered fully into our humanity, even as He lived a perfect life, with no trace of evil in his emotions, needs, thoughts, and behaviors.

But why would Jesus become like us? Why would he take on human flesh? Lest we romanticize the story of Christmas, the Bible sets us straight. Listen to these verses from the book of Hebrews:

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (12:14-15).

And from the book of I John: *"The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil."* (I John 3:8). Whoa! This doesn't sound like the stuff you'd write in a Christmas card, does it? But we need to understand that this baby—whom we tend to reduce to peacefully sleeping in the manger—has come to fight for us.

There are hard edges in the Christmas story that must be grasped before we can rejoice in this season. Advent offers us time to pause and contemplate these hard realities. Specifically, we are not the people that we were created to be. From the earliest days of human existence, we have wanted to rule our own lives rather than living under the gracious, holy Kingship of God. Our hearts have been tainted by sin, grasped by the

power of Satan, or the devil. We have literally become enslaved to evil, which leads to death, as we've insisted on having our own way and being our own masters. To help us see things more clearly, I'm going to read a passage from "The Message," which is a translation of the Bible that preserves the common idiom, or the street language, of the Greek in which the Word of God was originally written. Hear these words from Galatians:

"It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all of the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness . . . paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love and be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lop-sided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community" (ch. 5).

Does this sound like our world? Well, have you watched the news lately? Have you spent some time on Facebook? Or to get a bit more personal. Have you ever seen these dynamics in your workplace? Around your table at Christmastime? Have you seen these tendencies in your own heart? I have.

So there is more to Baby Jesus than meets the eye. He comes as a king, a warrior, and liberator, but one who will deploy the most unconventional, upside-down battle strategies. He comes to set us free by living a perfect life (doing what we can't do); absorbing all of the sin of the world; dying on the cross to pay for our sins; and defeating death by rising from the dead. The moment that God stirs faith in our hearts that we need to be rescued from our sin, the moment that we say, "Yes, Jesus, I trust you to be my Savior," God transfers to us the righteousness of Jesus. But there's more: Jesus doesn't only free us from the grip of sin and death. He brings us close to Him in the deepest way—by making us part of His family.

FAMILY: How does Jesus make us part of His family, and why does that matter? Here is what Galatians, chapter 4, tells us:

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘*Abba, Father.*’ [Abba is an intimate Aramaic word for “Dad” or “Papa.”] So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”

Elsewhere in the Bible we learn that even before the creation of the world, God’s plan for adoption was in place, to be accomplished through Jesus. We learn that anyone who receives Jesus and believes in His name gains the right to become a child of God. And we learn that our adoption brings pleasure to God and is borne out of His “glorious grace.”

God has been using my experiences as an adoptive parent to shed light on my own adoption into His family. To clarify, I have three sons, though only two here on earth. My oldest son, T____, came to us by birth nearly 13 years ago, following our infertility. My middle son, G____, lived a brief 90 minutes on this earth before he went to be with Jesus. My youngest son, L____, came to our family as a one-year-old, and we were able to adopt him as he turned two. A few quick caveats: I want to acknowledge that the adoption process here on earth is only a shadow, only an approximation, of the much grander reality of God’s adoption of us as His children. For example, I am not my child’s Savior, nor does my adoption of L eliminate the losses that he has suffered. In addition, I know that some of the women in this room are either adoptive parents or adoptees themselves, and I want to recognize the range of experiences in the realm of human adoptions, including a comingling of joy and grief. All of that said, adopting my little boy—now six years old—has intensified my

understanding of God's commitment to me and the utterly changed status of my identity.

For my husband and me, it was a humbling, intense experience to finalize L's adoption in a courtroom, with our family members there to bear witness. We stood in front of the judge, who presented vows for us to take. They included questions like, "Do you promise to love, nurture, and provide for this child for the entirety of your lives?" and "Do you understand that there will be hardships and inconveniences involved in parenting this child?" We entered the courtroom as a married couple who had been caring for a little toddler for almost one year, but when we left the courtroom, we were a bona fide family. We had a signed adoption decree. Our little boy had our last name. We soon received a birth certificate that identified my husband and me as the "natural parents." In truth, we weren't there at the hospital to celebrate his birth. In fact, we didn't even know of his existence until many months later. But this legal act of adoption was so complete, so transformative, that it created an entirely new reality. In an even more spectacular way, God's adoption of us gives us a new birth and a new identity. We become new creations in Him, with His heart, His divine life, implanted within us.

As we took our vows in the courtroom that November day, another question that the judge asked was, "Do you understand that this child officially becomes your heir, inheriting all that you have upon your death?" I was startled to hear the little boy in my arms being identified as my heir-- I guess because the word seemed so "aristocratic" to me. And indeed, in the writings of the apostle Paul in the Bible, he is invoking the ancient Roman practice of adoption used by emperors or dignitaries to ensure that they had a male heir to become their designated successors. But more broadly, family patriarchs could use adoption to elevate the status of a male from a lower-class family, and even to free a slave, and make him an heir. Paul's use of the word "sonship" is an inclusive, dignifying, and revolutionary gesture—to indicate that the *all* children of God become heirs, enjoying the full rights of inheritance traditionally ascribed to sons.

Adoption in the Roman tradition changed the adoptee's identity from outsider to insider--just as God brings us (as slaves to sin) into His family. It meant that the adoptee's old obligations and debts were eliminated, just as our sins are forgiven. Perhaps most interestingly, the adoptee became an heir while the family patriarch still lived and became a joint owner of the family's property right away, just as God considers us co-heirs during this life, with our inheritance even more fully realized in the future.

When my husband and I took our adoption vows, holding L in our arms, the judge also invited our older son T to stand and join us. In fact, as an eight-year-old at that time, he took the vows so seriously that he voiced them alongside us, and he even offered to sign the official legal paperwork afterwards. In some small way, T's participation was a picture of the role of Jesus in our adoptions. T is our child by birth, who was already considered our heir. But he welcomed L's addition to our family, and L became a co-heir with T, receiving everything that T receives and will receive from his parents. Remarkably, just as T became L's older brother, so the Bible tells us that Jesus is the "natural born" son who becomes our elder brother.

Yet as John Piper explains, "Even as we become fellow heirs with Jesus, He remains infinitely above us as our Savior. Indeed, the Bible says that, as the firstborn, Jesus is "the highest of the kings of the earth." Amidst his supremacy, he rejoices in sharing His inheritance with us, essentially adding His signature to our adoption decree with His very own blood. What is that inheritance, exactly? God Himself is our reward, the only One who can fully satisfy the thirst of our souls. We receive every spiritual blessing possible from Him, including forgiveness and eternal life. And in the future, we inherit the entirety of God's creation, all made new. Yes, the galaxies, the waterfalls, the mountains, the oceans, and all of the life that teems within them. Almost unimaginably, we are invited to reign over God's Kingdom with Him, with our own bodies redeemed. These gifts are too extraordinary for Christmas, aren't they? Our minds can hardly conceive of it all.

But as Paul clarifies in the books of Galatians and Romans, our adoption in to God's family offers another blessing that surpasses the benefits of the Roman legal mechanism. As many historians note, there was no sense of nurture or relationship in the Roman adoption tradition. But our adoption includes a wondrous intimacy with God, in which it becomes natural for us to call him "Papa" or "Daddy," reaching out for Him with a childlike confidence. There is belonging in God's family, both in terms of safety and protection, and in terms of an affectionate, delighted welcome. Think of the Bible story of the father who watches the horizon for his rebellious son and greets him lovingly, throwing a party to celebrate his return. Think of the book of Hosea, where God tenderly recalls His rescue of the people of Israel: "I led them with cords of kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them." Think of the relational blessings of unity and connection that we experience in God's household, where if one member suffers, we all suffer, and if one member rejoices, we all rejoice. Indeed, as we read in I John, chapter 3: "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God!"

Maybe intimacy with God is the very place where you struggle. When parents adopt a child from a hard place—from experiences of abandonment, instability, or neglect—the child can have trouble receiving love. For the sake of his own survival, the child may have learned to trust no one but himself. The world feels the safest when he is in charge. Perhaps you've heard tragic stories of children's emotional withdrawal and self-preservationist behaviors, even years after they are placed in a loving family. It's a little bit like the Israelites who, newly freed from slavery, longed to go back to their captivity in Egypt because they couldn't imagine trusting God to take care of them day by day. It's a little bit like us, actually, as we all come from a hard place—from being slaves to sin and death.

Before I became an adoptive parent, I had a rather idealistic view of my adoption as God's child. I pretty much imagined myself as Little Orphan Annie happily jumping into the arms of Daddy Warbucks. As I have seen my young son grow in his ability to trust parental love, I have recognized myself in him. There are times when I resist God's care for me by throwing a tantrum or living defensively. There are times when, deep down, I prepare myself to be disappointed or even abandoned by God; when I hoard other forms of "food" because I worry that He won't nourish me. In short, there are times when I am not "securely attached" to Him, despite His promises never to leave me or forsake me and to love me with an everlasting love. Maybe you know something of this in your own life? As an adoptive parent, I know that my own feelings of love can dry up pretty quickly with they are resisted. What's astonishing is that Jesus sacrificed His life for us when we were his enemies. The baby lying in the manger is an embodiment of God's pursuing, generous love.

I can tell you that when my little boy slowly began to show signs of trusting us, it felt like nothing short of a miracle. If L rested his head on my husband's shoulder, even for a moment, it was significant. If L came to me for help, I dropped everything to respond. I remember the thrill of hearing L talk to himself in his crib after we tucked him in for the night, and hearing him recite our names, "Mama, Daddy, Tu Tu." Perhaps it's a glimpse of the joy that God experiences when He hears us cry, "Abba, Father," trusting Him to rescue us from our sins and to care for us.

FLOURISHING: When God adopts us, He calls us into a flourishing life—into His own divine life. In one sense, this transformation happens instantly. When His Spirit moves us to trust in Jesus' saving work, God credits us with the righteousness of Jesus. We become holy and blameless in God's sight. But He also begins a process called sanctification, in which He makes us like Himself: holy, or set apart for sacred purposes. We are freed to live in the righteousness and goodness of His ways. We literally take on the likeness of God's family.

If you know my family, you know that we don't all look alike. We're a transracial family, given that L is African-American, and we enjoy those differences. But if you interact with us long enough, you'll see certain resemblances among us. We have inside jokes; we have a vocabulary that is part of our family culture; we have a shared history of bedtime routines, bike rides, and ball games that has woven us together. When L was about 2 and ½ years old, he developed a habit of approaching people, even relative strangers, and asking politely, "So . . . how was your day?" His question brought a smile to many people's faces, as it seemed uncharacteristically mature for a toddler. But as I listened to his vocal inflection and watched his face, I realized that he was imitating the question that I regularly asked each of our family members at the dinner table. As a child adopted into our family, he had spent enough time with us that he had begun to speak like us. Similarly, as we spend time reading God's Word and praying to Him, we increasingly identify with Him, and our family resemblance grows.

What does holiness mean, anyway? Unfortunately, sometimes we associate holiness with a sense of superiority; a cloistered, monastic life; or even a boring existence. But let me read these verses from the Bible (all from The Message translation). From I Peter: "As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy." From Colossians: "By giving himself completely at the Cross, actually *dying* for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence. You don't walk away from a gift like that!" From Romans: "This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid-grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike 'What's next, Papa?' So as you can see, holiness is living expansively and abundantly. It's flourishing, because God's righteous and perfect ways are best. God's ways make us truly human and truly holy.

The Bible offers a beautiful image of the flourishing life in God. I know we have some master gardeners in our midst tonight, so this picture

may especially speak to your green thumbs. In Romans, Paul describes non-Jewish people of God as branches that have been grafted into an olive tree that is nourished by the sap of a holy root. Grafting means that the stem from one tree is inserted into a cut portion of the base tree. The plant tissues are joined so that they eventually grow together as one tree. In a sense, this process represents our inclusion or our adoption into the family of God—and the way that His holiness nourishes us and spreads through our lives. We not only become healthy branches on God’s family tree, but we bear fruit from His Spirit’s transforming work in our hearts. We read in Galatians 5 (The Message):

“What happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.”

Sounds like a wonderful way to live, doesn’t it? Think of how differently we can engage with our family members, neighbors, or difficult people at Christmastime, with this fruit flowing out of our lives.

The Christmas trees up here can remind us of our adoption, our ingrafting into God’s family tree that Jesus makes possible by becoming one of us. In fact, as Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus’ birth, Jesus Himself is a branch on this tree, bearing the holiest fruit of all:

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.”

And the fruit that we bear isn't just for us. We are able to share that bounty with the world, as Isaiah clearly tells us that this holy root is to be a banner to gather people from all nations. God's character shines through us, like the lights on these trees, spreading light in the darkness of this world.

As this meditation comes to a close, I'd ask you to think back to our imaginative visit to the nativity scene, where we saw baby Jesus in the manger. Did you feel like an intruder, at some level? Perhaps you've known so many losses this year that you feel like you have no business coming near a newborn or venturing near a family. Perhaps you are so aware of your own wrongdoings that you can't imagine that Baby Jesus would want you to come close. Perhaps you've known Jesus for such a long time that your heart is somewhat jaded to the wonder of His coming. But in taking on human form, becoming vulnerable and helpless like us, Jesus reaches for you—and He invites you to reach for Him, to reach for Him in new ways, and to become a part of God's Holy family. He's patient and kind, and he does not turn away those who come to him, even if we do it weakly and awkwardly. As we read in Hebrews, "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." This Christmas, ask Him to help you understand that He comes to give you the greatest gift: Himself.

In a moment, I will lead us in prayer. After that point, we'll sit quietly and listen to music, engaging in "Selah," a pause or musical interlude that appears in the book of Psalms in the Bible. Please use those minutes of silence to consider the questions on the slide behind me, asking God to do His holy, sacred work in your heart.