

Text: Phil 2.6-8
St Stephen's

The Story of the Good Son

A Quiz

I have a quiz for you tonight. I'd like you to give the first answer that comes to your mind.

- There's a **reorganization at your place of employment**. Your position is being eliminated. There are **two positions that you can apply for**. One is a **promotion with a pay increase**. The other is a **demotion with a pay decrease**. Which would you apply for?
- There are **two offices that you can move into**. One has 18 square feet more—more space. Do you want the bigger office or the smaller office?
- At this new managerial level you have a **choice of dining rooms**. You now have access to the Executive Dining Room. You don't have to eat with the ordinary folks down in the cafeteria. Where are you going to eat?
- And at your new managerial level, when you **travel** you can fly business class instead of sardine class. So when you go to the airport, which are you going to choose?

Don't you see a pattern emerging? We have an almost incurable pull **up the ladder**, and we believe that after a lot of hard work, what's at the top is a deep peace and satisfaction, expanded opportunities, well deserved rewards, and a real sense of purpose and value in life. So when we have the chance, we climb.

When we get caught in a down cycle, everything seems to come apart. **When the economy goes down, or the jobs go down**, our self image takes a hit. Our pride is laid low. We worry about the value of our life. So, **when you have a choice**, almost every time we choose "up".

The Bible would to question how smart we are to believe that and warns about an "up-the-ladder" approach to life. God says **every time you go up the ladder, you're in increasingly dangerous territory** when it comes to your spiritual and relational health. It is all too easy on the way up the ladder to get addicted to power and achievement, and wonder why all the other people aren't as smart as you are. Pretty soon, you don't need God. You don't need that life partner who helped you get here. You don't have time for your kids anymore. It's all about

getting up the ladder. And it doesn't so much lead to much peace. A lot of us have found this out.

But there is **another reason** why the Bible warns about the journey up the ladder. It's because the central theme of the Bible – actually the central theme of the universe - is all about **a journey down the ladder...** all about how God's Son left the splendors of heaven and he took a series of voluntary demotions to step into our world. Listen to how Paul describes it...

“though he was God... he... did not demand and cling to his rights as God, but laid aside his mighty power and glory, taking the disguise of a slave and becoming like men. And he humbled himself even further, going so far as actually to die a criminal's death on a cross.”

Php 2:6-8 (The Living Bible)

Let's trace the steps... and let's start at the top.

“True God of True God”...

“though he was God...Php 2:6 (The Living Bible)

The Bible tells us that heaven is an environment of unimaginable glory and honor and purity and beauty. At the center of it all are the Father and His only Son.

“He was God...”, the scriptures say. Enthroned together, united in purpose and love and life, with a river of light and glory swirling out from them. Imagine it if you dare!

(Slide)

The sights and the sounds and the smells and splendors of heaven are what Jesus knew from eternity past. In heaven, Scripture tells us, for eons past there have been legions of angels hovering around the throne of God — tens of thousands of them worshipping, *“Holy, holy, holy. You alone are holy.”*

Scripture gives us hints of the glory of Jesus' life before his birth on earth. Listen to John's opening words from his gospel...

In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make.

Jn 1:1-3 (NLT)

Do you hear what he is saying?

- Before the entire created cosmos existed, He existed. He goes back billions of years; he was there “in the beginning”.
- John calls him the “Word of God”, and says He was “with” God, and at the same time he “was” God! He was both distinct from God – and yet also God!
- He was the creator and the life and the destiny **of everything**... from rank upon rank of mighty angelic hosts, to the great galaxies in their majestic orbits, to the sub-atomic particles, to the spiraling dance of the strands our genetic code... to the life of every creature and every person who has walked upon the face of the earth... all were created by him and for him.

It is a mouthful. In our Creed we say it like this: “*He was true God from true God.*” You have to take some time to think about it and wrestle with it. Because unless you do, you will never understand Christmas – or God – or you! But now something remarkable happens. **He steps down.**

God Enters the World as a Baby

“ he... did not demand and cling to his rights as God, but laid aside his mighty power and glory, taking the disguise of a slave and becoming like men...” Php 2:6-7 (The Living Bible)

I like the way Max Lucado says it...

“God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He floated in the amniotic fluids of his mother.” (God Came Near, p.26)

And then he was born, but not in a nice hotel or even in a hospital, but most likely in a **cave**, used as a barn, and he was laid in a **manger** - that’s where you put hay for the cattle and donkeys. It’s got dried saliva all over it. Animals scratch their faces on it.

(Slide)

The ground is hard. The place smells. It’s dirty. He’s there because the **inn was full** and there’s no room for him. His first **clothes** were simple pieces of cloth wrapped around his little wrinkled body. That’s all there is. This is how God steps into this world.

His face is all wrinkled and red. His cry is strong and healthy. He is totally **dependent** on his mother. And his step-dad. They have to keep him warm and

fed and protected. He **doesn't look much like a king**. No glory. No rank upon rank of angels. No throne. No power. It is a large step down the ladder. We don't often enough think about this; **we like the pretty manger scenes**; the kind where you think, "That would be neat to spend a couple of nights there." It was not neat. It was tough. We're a long way from home, here. So what does he do? He steps down again.

He Lives an Ordinary Life

From his first hours, there are no royal privileges. Within his first years he becomes a **refugee** in Egypt, running for his little life from a crazed King Herod. And then they returned to Israel. A paraphrase of John's gospel puts it like this...

"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood..."

John 1:14 (The Message)

He would spend 80% of his years on earth in a small, out-of-the-way city named **Nazareth**, a **common** Galilean city. He learns to walk and talk there. He grew in a very simple home. He **shared a room** with his brothers and maybe even with his sisters during his earlier years. Maybe his knees were knobby. He probably had pimples. He got hungry and tired. He would catch colds. His step-Dad was **a carpenter**. So Jesus worked alongside him in his shop and became one also. He would bruise his knuckles and get headaches and work long hours and smell bad when he sweated.

(Slide)

He would face all kinds of **temptations**. Temptations to lie, and temptations to put himself first. Temptations to dodge God's purpose for his life, and temptations of doubt and temptations of lust and face to face temptations from Satan that would make your hair stand on end. He faced every kind of temptation. Maybe the hardest was the temptation to go back up the ladder.

So what does he do? He steps down again.

He Becomes a Servant

"taking the disguise of a slave..."

Php 2:6-8 (The Living Bible)

He hangs out with crowds of people and invests himself in twelve special followers. He has time for people whom everyone else has given up on. He'd

listen when you talked, and you'd listen when he talked. You knew he really understood! And when he was there, there was this uncanny sense that God was there, too. He loved to get near people, and they loved to get near to him. People came to him in the heat of the day and in the secret hours of the night. Little children and blind men and desperate parents and hungry rabbis and broken women and tough men and hard working businessmen. He walked in their streets and they came to him. He tried to get away for a rest and they poured out after him. And he spent more time with them. He was a servant.

Even when the tide shifted against him, he served. Eventually people started to roll their eyes, cross their arms when he taught. and in the end, they almost all walked away. But Jesus **keeps serving**. When people reject his teaching, he keeps teaching. When followers give up on him, he doesn't give up on them, when people profess undying loyalty and even plot to betray him, he kneels to wash their feet on the evening of their failure. This King has come to serve. And then what does he do? One more time he steps down...

He Goes to the Cross

“And he humbled himself even further, going so far as actually to die a criminal’s death on a cross.”

Php 2:8 (The Living Bible)

He lays down his own life for the sake of his followers. And remember that it isn't just any death that he embraces, but death on a cross...

He has laid aside his glory and his power. He “empties himself”, the scriptures say. He has poured it all out, given it all up. You and I know a little bit about this kind of step; it's like a mother is willing to endure the pain of birth for the joy of the child – or like an athlete willing to give up the hard years of discipline for the joy of victory. Or maybe better yet it is like a soldier who is willing to place his life on the line for the freedom and liberty and well being of others. As great as sacrifices like that are, his is much greater. Because he has come down so far, given up so much more. It is the most remarkable event in the history of the universe.

There of some of us here tonight who might want to take a moment right here and ask a few questions. Maybe one like this....

- "Do you mean to tell me that the uncreated God who existed before anything and created everything really became a baby and was born in a stable 2000 years ago?"
- "And then he grew up in a working class home and never went to college and never traveled outside his country and never held any office or wrote any books but called himself the Son of God and said he had the authority to forgive sins and said he was the light of the world and promised his followers that if they believed in him and followed him they would live forever?"
- "And then all his followers deserted him and he was crucified and 3 days later he was raised from the dead and he expected all that?"
- "And all this happened because God wants to bring people back to him and forgive their sins and heal their lives and show us how much he loves us?"
- "Don't you think that is a bit much - a little over the top?"

Well, yes it is. Actually it is way over the top. I have to admit it. I never would have done it. I've been much too busy climbing up the ladder. I don't know anyone who would have done it. Except God. It still astounds me that he actually did it. It still takes my breath away. As a matter of fact, what is really unexplainable to me is why anyone would ever refuse love like this.

My guess is that people who are still trying to climb the ladder have the hardest time with this. They still believe it is all about them. But those who have made it to the top - and found that it's not worth the price they have had to pay - or people who have fallen off on the way up and know what it is like to crash at the bottom - these are the people maybe who can see more clearly. Because when you get over yourself, when you get yourself out of the way - you can see God and hear God better than ever.

I want to ask of you two things on this Christmas night. Here's the first.

Ask Him into Your Life

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

Jn 1:12 (NIV)

Some of us tonight are ready to start a relationship with this God-man, this Jesus. You may think, "I have spent most of my life climbing that ladder, and I

have made a lot of people pay the price along the way. I could never have a relationship with God.” **You’re wrong.** You may think, “Everything I have given my life for has ended up being empty. I don't think I am every going to find the kind of purpose and meaning and peace I thought I could find in life.” **You’re wrong.** You may think, "I’m a nobody. God doesn’t care about me.” **You’re wrong.** You may think, I’ve messed up in relationship after relationship. No one wants to get near me any more.” **You’re wrong.** You may think, “I’ve got so many secrets that no one would want to stick around if they knew them all.” **You’re wrong!** God says, “I became a man just exactly to step into **your world**, into your life, into the neighborhood where you live.” It’s been a long costly journey for him, but it was worth it – because of you. **That’s the Christmas miracle. That’s what you were made for!** I wonder if you are ready to say yes to him tonight. That is the first think I want to ask of you.

Here's the second.

Take His Hand, Step Down and Serve People

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Php 2:5 (NIV)

I want to ask you to do in your life what Jesus did in his. I want to ask you to stoop, and serve, and love someone - like Jesus did. I want to ask you to invest yourself in some people around you who are hurting or empty or alone - that's what Jesus did.

Prayer..

Lord, all of us here tonight are at **different stages in our spiritual journey.**

- Some of us are **seekers**, and we’re saying, “I’m not even sure I buy this, but I’m honest enough to say that I don’t really know what my life is all about. But I’ve got to say it gets pretty lonely sometimes and it gets pretty confusing sometimes. God, will you help me find out what my life is all about, and maybe work a Christmas miracle in me?”

- Some of us started out with a relationship some time ago, Lord Jesus, but now we're not really very close. Maybe we've been **looking to other people to meet a love need that only you can satisfy?** Maybe we've been **living to please the wrong person.** Maybe we've been living in fear of the opinions of people too much, while you embrace the truth of God too little? And honestly, maybe I've been more concerned about my plans than yours, about my purposes than yours. And it hasn't been going so well. Could you help me to start over? Lord I am coming to you for a miracle tonight.”
- Some of us are **believers**, maybe for a short time, or maybe for a long time, and we want to go deeper with You this coming year than we've ever gone before and live lives that are marked by the Christmas miracles – of a love relationship with you, and of a life of purpose.

“Dear God, would you help us, each one of us? Thank you for the greatest miracle of all miracles, the entry of your son into our world and our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.