

Text: Matthew 1.18
St Stephen's

Dec 24th, 2007
Christmas Eve

God Came Down...

Christmas can be so **confusing**... and I wonder about it. Every year I get going so fast doing important things, good things, so many 'must be done' things. I think **Bart Simpson has it right**: "Aren't we forgetting the true meaning of Christmas? You know... the birth of Santa."

Every year I say it is going to be different. But every year it is the same. There comes a moment when we really have to **take time out** if we're going to stay sane. **My time out** started about two days ago. I just slowed down. I started **re-reading Christmas stories** I had read to the children when they were little. They were wonderful. I started thinking about God and Jesus and tonight.

I hope tonight is a 'time out' for you. And I want to start with a **different kind of Christmas story**... (you may notice I snuck in a very different bible reading tonight)

- Some 50 years after the birth of Jesus, some 16 years after his death and resurrection. Paul is on his **first mission journey**, taking the gospel to the gentile world. Paul is going to see things he has never seen before on this trip.
- The first mission was in a place called **Lystra**, a small city found now in modern day Turkey.
- As he began speaking in that city, he **healed a man** lame from birth. Then we find this description...

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"

Acts 14:11-13

The '*gods had come down in human form!* Don't miss that phrase. They **thought it was Christmas, so to speak**. They thought their Roman gods had taken on human form.

The Roman gods **promised help** with love and marriage, war and peace, the bounty of crops and prosperity in commerce. There were over 30 annual festivals to the gods of the Roman culture. Legend had it that **on occasion they would come down in the likeness of men.**

Most of these gods had **local temples** in places like Lystra. Zeus did. And when the **priest of the temple** of Zeus heard about Paul and Barnabas and the miracle and what people were saying, he was **up and at it.** They wanted to **offer sacrifice** to Paul and to Barnabas. 'The gods had come down in human form'! **It was Christmas.**

You think that we don't believe these kinds of things anymore, since the birth of Jesus, but I am not so sure... **Modern people almost believe** that we have gods walking among us in human form in our own day. Let me tell you what I mean...

I remember when we first started to see the **rise of the rock bands** in the 60's – the Beatles and the Beach Boys had hit the scene. When we went to the concerts, we weren't just going for the party. We had stars in our eyes. We thought if we **hitched our lives** to their lives, it would bring meaning and value and excitement and a different kind of life to us. **We worshipped** at those concerts! The gods were walking among us! It was **a kind of Christmas.**

We would have given **anything** to be up on that stage, living their lives. We **memorized** the songs, we **dressed** like them, we **acted** like them, we couldn't get close enough to them... We **wanted to be them!** I call that worship.

Over the last 50 years the **celebrity culture in the West has become a major player in our life.** Go on over to your supermarket and stand in the check-out line and look at the **magazines:** *People, In Touch, Globe, National Enquirer.* Turn on your **TV** and watch the shows: *Entertainment Tonight, Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*

You know the names: Brad, Britney, Angelina, Oprah, Michael, Kobe,

Martha, Shaq, J-Lo, Paris. We have political celebrities as well. Hillary, Barak, W. Did you notice that we **don't need their last names**. We **know them that well**.

We call them celebrities. That means they are **famous**. It used to be that you were famous for having done something worthwhile. But now you can often be **famous for being famous**. And actually we seem to confer fame on people today not for being good, but **for being bad**. So you can be famous for being infamous!

Why do we do this? Well, **because life is tough, and in a tough world, they live our fantasies**. Modern celebrities are adored by the public, they are fabulously wealthy, or stunningly beautiful, or they get away with a lot. We have fantasies about all those kinds of things.

So **we join the movement**. We **give them a lot of space** in our heads and hearts. Adulation and attention and praise and maybe even worship. When we get close to them, we think *'the gods have come down in human form.'* It's a kind of Christmas.

But here is the deal: **not all the gods who put a claim on your heart are worth your heart**. And you have to sort it out.

I want to give you **several quick ways to sort out** the little gods from the real God, the pretend Christmases from the real Christmas...

1) The Little Gods Will Drop You. The Real God Can Carry You.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

What you put your trust in has to hold the weight of your life. When you put your trust in anything but the real God, it will fail you. It can't carry you.

We have **a famous family photo** that was taken when I was a boy. I grew up on a farm that had a pond. Every year we would wait for the ice to freeze and skate on it. But we didn't like to shovel it. My Dad got this idea. We had an old jeep with a plow on it. Hand cranked up and down. One specially cold winter, Dad took it out on the pond and plowed the snow off the ice. Great idea! Wow! He tried it again a couple winters later. The photo is of **our jeep with its nose down into the pond**. The ice broke under its weight. Both of those winters, Dad was sure the pond would hold. **One winter it did. One winter it didn't.** It all depends on **how thick** the ice is.

You and I **need thick ice** to live on... thick enough to bear the weight of our lives. Maybe you are in **a season of suffering**. You need the real God, not a little god. Maybe you have **a relationship** that is broken, or **a business** that has crashed... or you have **someone off at war**... or maybe you have **a sin that has taken** over and made your life unmanageable... You need the real God, not a little god.

Watch out for those little gods who will drop you every time when life gets tough. Their Christmas parties always break your heart in the end. The real Christmas is different. In that stable was born the one *called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* **He can carry you.**

2) The Little Gods Puff Up. The Real God Bends Down

He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle.

Isaiah 42:3 (NLT)

The texts about Jesus' origin have **a common theme**.

- He is born in the cultural backwaters of **Bethlehem** and He grows up in Nazareth; this is not Rome or Antioch or even Jerusalem. .
- He is delivered in **a stable**, wrapped in strips of cloth, and laid in a manger. This is not a comfortable home, or normal clothes or a normal bed.
- His **parents are poor**, working class folks, they are not people of any means or privilege

In the end, celebrities have **a very short life-span**. The celebrity culture is **always looking for someone new**. Some new hero, new politician, new quarterback, new star. Because **the old ones always fail**. The little gods always will.

Talking to my dad this past week. This last month he turned 90 and I turned 60. We have had some wonderful visits this month. I had lunch with him last Friday in Cleveland, and we were talking about the difficult years I had between 18 and, oh, about 24. I asked him, "What did you do to help me?" Because he and Mom were my lifeline then. He looked at me and said, "I stayed with you until you were through it." And he did.

I have thought a lot about those words of his over the past days. His 'stay with you until you are through it' love was to me **a signpost** that pointed to a greater love, a greater Father. To Immanuel. I came to faith in Jesus at the end of those years, and he has been with me ever since. In good times and tough times, in moments of fulfillment and moments of failure. *"I will stay with you till you are through it..."*

The **little gods** can never do this. They **always fail**. They can't help it. But **behind the little gods there is a real God**. Behind their pretend Christmases, there is a real Christmas. Beyond their broken love is the healing love of a baby who really is "God in human form". Immanuel. God with us.

Maybe tonight you have been driving on ice, so to speak, and you hear the cracks under your tires, and you are not sure you know a God who can hold you up. Maybe your car has fallen through and you are in a mad scramble to survive.

Christmas is real. The real God did take on human form and walk among us. And he can bear the weight of your life.

Tonight, could we take a moment to talk to him...