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Sermon Series: *Sing in Exultation*, No.3

Condescension

December 19, 2021

Luke 2:1-7 [NIV]

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

We are in Luke today, which is a change from what's in the worship folder and from what I'd planned. You could turn there if you'd like, though. The book of Luke, Chapter 2.

Would you take a minute here and think about this question: who is the most famous, the most well-known, person that you have ever not just seen or met in passing, but that you've had at least a bit of conversation with? More than just saying, "Hello, it's nice to meet you."

Can you think of who that is?

Do you remember what that meeting was like? Were you disappointed with who they turned out to be or how they acted? Or were you pleased, maybe pleasantly surprised, in who you discovered them to be?

As a person, were they like what you expected, or worse, or better?

My brother-in-law, Dale, who is a police officer in Alaska, has a way of unintentionally winding up meeting famous people. He sat on a plane with Huey Lewis and the News. (That was a very famous pop rock group for you who are either over 70 or under 30.)

Just recently, he got to spend some time with Guy Fieri, who visited Alaska on a hunting trip.

Dale says that in both of these cases, the people were just as nice in person as they are on TV. Approachable, friendly, not at all pretentious.

So, who's the most famous, the most well-known, person you've ever gotten to talk with?

For me, it would have to be Mitch McConnell.

Just a couple months after President Trump took office, Senator McConnell came to Wilmore specifically to talk with faith leaders here about the state of the commonwealth and of the country. I know he came to talk with the presidents of the university and the seminary specifically, but he also invited all local church pastors to join him for an hour or so.

So, I went to that.

He was the senate majority leader then and certainly the most "important" famous person I'd ever been in a room with, and a number of things surprised me about that meeting.

First, I realized that he's way shorter than I expected him to be, which is not really important, but it was surprising. When everyone stood up, he was the shortest one in the room.

Second, I was surprised at how few people actually bothered to attend. All told, I think there were maybe only 20 of us there.

And then third and most importantly, I was super surprised at how genuinely open and accessible McConnell was.

I know that may be hard to imagine — it was hard for me to imagine, because I certainly have plenty of preconceived notions of politicians, especially at the national level. But you know, I left there feeling as if he had been genuinely honest and even surprisingly vulnerable regarding his concerns about Washington, about congress, about Trump's election and about all of the unknowns and new ground that was being turned up in national politics at that time.

I went in thinking he'd offer only very cautious, canned, politically correct, sound-byte statements, but that was not at all his manner — not at all what he did.

He came clear from Washington — as busy a guy as he was — to this little, insignificant town, to engage with a super-small group of people, and he was engaging and honest and even personally vulnerable with us. He took the time to ask questions and listen to our thoughts on things.

He was not at all what I expected, and I was surprised at what I thought was a picture of true condescension.

And I mean that, of course, in a positive way.

I know that the word "condescension" is seen almost exclusively as negative in these days.

But in truth, "condescension" does have a very positive meaning: it presents the idea that someone of high position would willingly put aside their status and lower themselves in order to honestly and helpfully engage with those who are, in some way or another, "below" them.

And whatever I may or may not appreciate about McConnell's politics, I truly felt he'd done that. He came, he listened, he related — he truly engaged.

If you've ever seen the reality show *Undercover Boss*, you've seen something like this too. It's where company presidents actually disguise themselves and take entry-level jobs in their own companies to get that perspective — to see how things are really going in the organization they're running.

Same sort of thing.

Condescension: the voluntary lowering of oneself in order to bring good to the whole.

Back in the mid-1800s, a young lady by the name of Emily Elliott noticed this characteristic in Jesus.

Emily was the daughter of an Anglican pastor, and she wanted to help the children in her dad's church better understand the significance of Jesus' incarnation—Jesus' coming to earth.

She was taken with what Luke 2: 7 says: how *Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

Emily could not get out of her mind the willingness of the Promised Messiah—the very Son of God—to be homeless upon His arrival on earth. The magnitude of that sort of condescension was something that she felt spoke more powerfully of Jesus' heart and love for us than just about anything else.

So, to help even children grasp this, she wrote a song for them to sing. The first four verses of it use a technique called antithesis—where you place opposites in successive phrases, to highlight the distinction or difference.

Emily wrote nearly the whole song placing the splendor of Jesus' person and purpose and Heavenly home in contrast to the poverty of the circumstances of His earthly birth and life, and she separated the two parts each time with the word "but."

"Jesus is King, *but* He came to earth, and lived on earth, in a very non-kingly way, and He did that because He loves us." That's the essence of what she wanted the children there to grasp, which you can see in her song, *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne*. We've already sung it—it's number 127 in the hymnal.

Of course, it's all in King James' English, since that was the *tongue du jour* of sacred poems and songs in the mid-1800s.

And, it's all in first person: it's written in a conversational, or prayer, form. The songwriter is declaring, or rehearsing to Jesus what He did.

Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown when thou camest to earth for me;

But in Bethlehem's home there was found no room for Thy holy nativity.

Jesus lived a life of absolute royalty at His Father's side. All He would ever want was at His command, which included, not just physical richness, but far more importantly spiritual and emotional and relational richness. With God the Father, Jesus lived a life surrounded by truth and honesty and warmth. He lived immersed in genuine love.

And yet, He chose to come here where not only did He have nothing physically, but nearly all those around Him proved to be untrustworthy and unloving.

Paul talks of this in Second Corinthians 8, where he writes, "*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you, through his poverty might be rich.*"¹

In Heaven, Jesus could have whatever He wanted, *except* the eternal company of His own rebellious creation. So, He chose to lower Himself—to subject Himself to our world—for our sake.

Elliot goes on with her song: *Heaven's arches rang and the angels sang, proclaiming your royal decree—but of lowly birth did you come to earth...*

The host of Heaven jumped at every word of Jesus. Everyone around Him did exactly what He said or what He asked—there. There was no question of His authority in Heaven.

And yet He willingly left that place to come to a place where He was among the lowest of the low. A place where people would not listen to—would not obey, would not respect—Him.

The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would be, "*despised and rejected by humanity.*" He would be, "*A man of suffering and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, He'd be despised and held in low esteem.*"²

Still, He chose that path. Jesus chose that life of condescension. He lowered Himself—He subjected Himself to our world—for our sake.

The song goes on: "*Foxes and birds have a place to live, but you, Jesus—the King—did not.*"

Even the animals of our world have a place to call home.

Yet Jesus chose to come to a place where He would not even have space of His own. Jesus admitted this Himself. Luke records Him saying, when someone offered to follow Jesus wherever He might go, "*Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.*"³

He had no physical place of refuge here, no safe place.

He was vulnerable and completely exposed to the world.

The song goes on, "*In your coming, you brought people the great news of salvation, but in return they crucified you.*"

Here is maybe the most confounding part of Jesus' condescension: His whole point in coming was to bring this tremendous news of salvation—to bring opportunity for redemption and hope to a broken, condemned, and hopeless world.

And in response to this greatest of all offers, He was mocked and tortured and killed by the very ones to whom He offered it.

Just as Matthew reports it, as Jesus hung on the cross, "*The chief priests, scribes, and elders mocked Him, saying, 'He saved others, but He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel? Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God? Let God deliver Him now if He wants Him.'*"⁴

The coming of Jesus to earth is, really, the most profound example of condescension in the history of the world. It is Undercover Boss to the absolute extreme.

² Isaiah 53:3

³ Luke 9:58

⁴ Matthew 27:41-43

¹ 2 Corinthians 8:9

That the world's King and Creator would even come here and walk among us in the first place is remarkable enough. But that He would come in such a humble way – that He would subject Himself to realities of our world that would cause His own suffering and to such a degree – is almost unbelievable!

And yet He did, to secure salvation for any who would see Him and embrace Him and follow Him.

Such is His love for us.

We humans are so motivated by self-promotion, you know? We are so consumed with taking care of number one. It is part of our condition that is so deeply embedded within us that we can hardly even understand Jesus' sort of self-giving humility.

We wonder, "How could someone ever think of doing what He did – leaving what He left and coming here from where He came from?"

How could anyone do that? Why would anyone do that?

The simple answer is, "Love – God's love for us."

We can't even seem to comprehend that sort of love, and we sometimes get lost in trying to understand it.

The fact is, though, it's OK if we don't understand it.

The important thing is that we *receive* it.

The fact is, we *have to receive it before we can* ever hope to understand it.

We don't know, exactly, how Jesus could leave what He left and suffer what He did.

All we need to know, though, is that God loves us that much – and He wants us that much.

God so loved the world – He sent His Son that whoever believes in Him won't perish but have eternal life.⁵

Jesus came from Paradise to the pit, comparatively and, frankly, literally, because He wants us and because He loves us that much.

John, in His gospel, says it like this: "***Jesus came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him – to those He gave the right to become children of God.***"⁶

To any who would listen to Him – to any who would make room for Him – He made the offer of salvation.⁷

Tragically though, even from the moment He arrived, it seems very few really made room for Him – which is why Emily Elliott concludes her song the way she does.

After reporting the contrast of all that Jesus left versus all He experienced on earth – the contrast of all who embraced Him in heaven versus all who rejected Him on earth – she declares in her song:

But Jesus, there is room for you with me – within me!

Where this world rejected you, I will receive you!

Where this world turned its back on you, I will embrace you!

Where people here dismissed you, I will honor you and respect you.

Where others have ignored you, I will listen to you.

Where people here have turned you away, I will welcome you!

Come to my heart, Lord Jesus – there is room in my heart for you!

This is the response Jesus came looking for. It's why He left heaven, why He engaged with our world, why He endured the suffering He did: so that we might know God; so we might have a relationship – an eternal relationship – with the God who made us.

Sin has done funny things to our self-conceptions. People here either think they're perfect – or that they're unlovable.

God says neither is true.

We're nowhere near perfect – but neither are we unlovable.

The fact is, God thinks we're worth Jesus' sort of condescension – not because there's so much good in us, but because there's so much good in Him.

In His letter to the Philippian church, the Apostle Paul put it this way: [the Undercover Boss wants to know us so badly that] "***Jesus, though he was God, did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges, took the humble position of a slave, and was born as a human being – humbling himself in obedience to God and even dying a criminal's death on a cross.***"⁷

Jesus demonstrates condescension of a truly divine magnitude.

Please, don't let it be for nothing in your life.

Jesus came to earth looking for entry into open hearts. Mostly He found lots of closed doors.

He still looks, though, for ones who will see Him for Who He is – for those who will appreciate what He's done, and who will invite Him in.

Will you invite Him in?

He gave so much. He gave all He had, really, to make the opportunity possible.

So great is His love for me and for you – for us.

Of all the decisions that come with the holidays, this one is the most important: will you consider all that Jesus gave up for our good – for our salvation – and will you make room in your heart for Him?

Closing Song: *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne* (verses 1, 2, 5)

Benediction: Only if we'll say to Him, "There is room in my heart for you, Jesus!" will He be able to answer at our death, "Now, you come to me! Since you made room for me in life, so now I have made room for you in your death."

To put it bluntly, that's the deal.

That's what He came to earth to provide.

That's what He died on a cross to make possible.

May we all take Jesus up on it!

⁵ John 3:16

⁶ John 1:10-12

⁷ Philippians 2:5-8

Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne

Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.

[Refrain]

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.

2. Heaven's arches rang when the angels sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But of lowly birth didst Thou come to earth,
And in great humility. [Refrain]

3. The foxes found rest, and the birds their nest
In the shade of the forest tree;
But Thy couch was the sod, O Thou Son of God,
In the deserts of Galilee. [Refrain]

4. Thou camest, O Lord, with the living Word,
That should set Thy people free;
But with mocking scorn and with crown of thorn,
They bore Thee to Calvary. [Refrain]

5. When the heavens shall ring, and the angels sing,
At Thy coming to victory,
Let Thy voice call me home, saying "Yet there is room,
There is room at My side for thee."

My heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,
When Thou comest and callest for me.

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