

Let the Word of Christ dwell richly among you.

Colossians 3:12-17 / Luke 2:41-52

The Mystery of the Incarnation

Today is the first Sunday after Christmas. For many, Christmas is a holiday season filled with joy, but it's also a season that feels busy and even exhausting. There's so much to do! Yet, the Christmas rush eventually fades. The cheerful carols that once filled the streets grow silent. The sparkling lights on trees and the festive decorations are packed away. Life returns to the ordinary.

The same can happen with the joy we felt on Christmas Eve as we sang "Joy to the World" together, celebrating the birth of Jesus. Over time, that joy dims. As the New Year begins, we step back into our routines, the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

But here's something we must remember: the mystery of the Incarnation—the Word becoming flesh—is not just about the birth of Jesus on Christmas. Christmas is only the beginning of this incredible story. The passages we read today remind us of another meaning of Christmas that we often overlook.

In Luke's Gospel, we hear about twelve-year-old Jesus traveling to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. For Jewish families, going to the temple for Passover was a regular part of life. At age twelve, children were allowed to participate in this pilgrimage. It seems this was Jesus' first time joining His parents on this journey.

In those days, families often traveled with relatives and neighbors, so it wasn't uncommon for children to wander out of their parents' sight. After the Passover celebration, Joseph and Mary assumed Jesus was somewhere among the group. It wasn't until they had traveled a full day that they realized He was missing. Panicked, they rushed back to Jerusalem and searched everywhere. After three days, they found Him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking questions.

Even as the Son of God, Jesus didn't come into the world with all the answers. He grew in understanding, seeking God's will. He asked questions and learned from others. This, too, is part of the mystery of the Incarnation: to grow, mature, and evolve. That's what it means to take on flesh—to live.

Luke 2:52 says, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people." Physical growth happens naturally, but wisdom? That doesn't come automatically. And becoming someone beloved by God and others? That takes effort. Jesus, too, had to discern God's will and strive to live accordingly. Like us, He likely wrestled with doubt and struggled in moments of silence from God. But He never stopped seeking and loving God. He grew in wisdom, and the love of God within Him became more evident. Through His words, teachings, life, and actions, He as the Song of God revealed God's will and love to the world.

We Too Must Grow

Like Jesus, we are called to grow. Yet, many believers stop growing spiritually. Some cling to a past moment of spiritual fervor or rely on the fact that they were once active and devoted. But as I often remind you, faith isn't something we finish—it's something we keep building, step by step, every day. It doesn't matter if you gave your all to love God in the past—what matters is the present. If you were healthy in the past but are sick now, you are sick. Likewise, if you once stumbled but have since repented and are growing in faith, then that's what counts. If your spiritual growth has stalled for any reason, take even the smallest step to begin growing again. That's what it means to be alive.

Children of God's Love

To grow, we must first understand who we are. Let me ask: when did Jesus realize He was the Son of God? Have you ever thought about that? Scholars debate this—some believe He always knew, while others suggest He gradually came to understand through special revelations or through His growth in God's grace. What's clear is that in today's passage, Jesus knew who He was. When His parents scolded Him, He responded, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). Jesus understood God as His Father and Himself as God's Son.

Now let me ask you: when did you realize you are a child of God? Truly knowing that you are God's beloved child is more than intellectual knowledge or a fleeting emotional experience. When you fully grasp that you are loved by God, your life changes—it has to.

Imagine someone claiming to be a vegetarian while eating a hamburger every day. It wouldn't make sense! Similarly, when we realize we are God's beloved children, our love and actions must reflect that truth.

Growing in Ordinary Life

Colossians shows us how to grow: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another... And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:12-14).

Living as God's chosen, beloved, and holy people means growing in compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, and love. These virtues don't come naturally. They require effort and intentional cultivation.

James K.A. Smith, in his book *You Are What You Love*, calls humans "desiring beings," driven by love—the most powerful force shaping our lives. What we love determines how we live. But simply knowing what's good doesn't change us. For instance, we all know eating vegetables and exercising are good for us. But does knowing that make it easy to do? Most of us would say no. So how can we influence what we love? Through habits.

I once had a meal with a church member in his 80s who exercises daily, rain or shine. When I asked how he stayed so disciplined, he said, "It's such a routine now that not doing it feels harder." Healthy habits take time and repetition, but eventually, they shape who we are.

Smith describes love as "a kind of automaticity." When holy habits become part of our character, they begin to guide us unconsciously. To transform our love, we must cultivate these holy habits. Worship and Scripture are foundational to this process. Smith refers to worship as an "Imagination Station." Through worship, we realign our hearts toward God and envision a world beyond what we see. We are reminded that life is not about worldly success but about longing for God's Kingdom. Through communion and Scripture, we are drawn into God's story, discovering the joy of being part of God's saving work.

Think about the closing moments of a Christmas Eve service: singing "Silent Night" and passing the candlelight. The once-dark sanctuary gradually fills with light, a powerful reminder that Christ, the Light of the World, still shines within us. That's the mystery of the Incarnation—the light of life that dispels darkness lives in us.

This light is not meant to remain hidden. It is a reality we encounter in worship and are called to embody in our daily lives. How can we carry this light forward? In the ordinary moments of each day, choose to love a little more, give thanks a little more, and serve a little more. These small acts, repeated faithfully, allow God's love to take root and grow richly within us.

Imagine what could happen if each of us let the light of Christ shine through our words, actions, and attitudes. Imagine a community where compassion, kindness, and forgiveness overflow, where God's love is so abundant that it transforms not only us but also those around us.

That's what truly matters—dwelling and growing in God's love and grace. So, as we step into this New Year, let us not simply return to the routines of daily life. Instead, let us embrace the mystery of the Incarnation and live as people who carry Christ's light into the world.

May the Word of Christ dwell richly among you, and may your life shine with the love, grace, and joy of God. Amen.