

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Bridging the Gap”

Pastor David K. Groth
Christmas Eve, 2020

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

I was standing in line at the grocery store the other day. They had installed a plexiglass screen in front of the cash register to keep both customers and cashiers safe. What I found interesting was how many people tried to talk to the cashier without the screen. They would peak around the side instead.

There’s something about speaking face-to-face that is so important to us. Like you, I long for the day when we can get rid of these blasted masks and those plexiglass screens, zoom meetings and the six feet of distancing. I long for the day of getting together with family and friends in our homes, without fear, without measuring the risks. I have a problem with separation and isolation from those I love. Maybe you do too.

The message of Christmas Eve is God has a problem with separation from those He loves. It’s not that He needs us; we need Him. Because He’s compassionate and merciful, He’s not content being socially distanced from us. He’s not content with the great divorce between God and man, heaven and earth. God is not content with people being isolated from Him temporarily on earth or permanently in hell. No! God wants relationship with us, and not one where we suppose him to be an angry, fearsome judge but rather where we know Jesus as our Brother and Friend and Savior.

Trouble is, John 4 says “God is spirit” (v. 24). So, how can God as spirit establish relationship with us? How many spirits do you know? I don’t know a one; and if a spirit wanted to make himself known to me, he’s going to have to do it in physical ways. He’s going to have to spell it out for me, and not just because I’m a guy, but because I live in a very physical, tangible world. If anyone wants to communicate with me, it will have to be with a pen on paper, or a text message to my phone or, better yet, face to face.

But nothing is impossible for God. Because God is not content with His people being socially distanced from Him, His voice sounded out in the Garden of Eden loud and clear, and sound waves bounced off the ear drums of Adam and Eve. Because God is not content with His people being isolated from Him, He gave Moses the ten commandments engraved into stone tablets. Later still, God proclaimed His Word through the prophets and had that Word written onto papyrus scrolls, and then books made of vellum, and then paper and then digitally so we can read His Word on a screen. His Word is transmitted also through the voices of His people. The point is, it’s physical! It’s all so physical! God makes Himself known to us in the only ways we can receive Him and does not tire of doing this.

Ultimately, in a huge gambit to bridge the gap between God and man, God *becomes* man. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The Son of God became a baby. You can hold a baby, but not from six feet away! You can also pass a baby around from person to person. “Here, you hold him now.” Any God who comes to us as a baby means us no harm.

That old angry judge with the gavel in his hand can harm us, but a baby is as nonthreatening as any human being can be.

So, you want to know what God is like? Look at the baby of Bethlehem. There He is – not in unbearable glory but humble and lying in a manger. Which means He’s approachable, even for shepherds.

You want to know what God thinks of you? There He is as a grown man, patiently teaching His disciples and answering questions. There He is, bringing the wine to a wedding in Cana. There He is, weeping for a friend who has died, talking to a woman with a very bad reputation as if she were His equal. There He is, staying at the home of a short tax collector so that He might also enjoy the hospitality of the tax collector’s heart. He breaks every social distancing rule in the book. He eats with sinners; touches those with leprosy; takes the dead by the hand and lifts them up to life. Clearly, the Creator wants relationship with His creation, all of it; and clearly, His creation needs relationship with Him.

Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). Think about that, won’t you, as you imagine him lying there, humble in a manger. Mary and Joseph are there and the shepherds are crowding around, and none are wearing masks. And there’s no plexiglass cage around the manger, nor any stickers on the dirt floor to keep you six feet apart. These things are our burdens to bear for now, and we can. It’s not so difficult, and it won’t be forever.

The infant, however, has his own burdens to contend with, and far more dangerous than any virus. Herod comes to mind, and Pontius Pilate and those Roman executioners, the devil himself. . . and you and me, with all our toxic sin. Jesus would have to contend with all of it. The filth of the manger is the least of his concerns. The filth of your sin and mine . . . that’s another matter, because the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is. 53:6) and because there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22). To bridge the gap between God and man, heaven and earth, Jesus dies on a cross.

Risen from the dead, God continues to bridge the gap in Holy Baptism, where He takes us in His arms even as infants and embraces us and wraps us up tight in swaddling clothes made of His righteousness. God bridges the gap in the Lord’s Supper, where we become one with the Body of Christ. And on the Last Day, God will bridge the gap one last time when He takes us to heaven. There, according to John’s vision, Jesus, in the flesh will reach out with his own hand and wipe away your tears. Not even He can do that from six feet away.

In Jesus, God has bridged the gap. Thanks be to God. Amen.