

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Presence of God*
SERIES: *Heaven Came Down*
SCRIPTURES: *Luke 1:26-33; Exodus 33:7; Exodus 40:34*
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**Credit to THE BIBLE PROJECT; NT Wright; John Ortberg*

Well good morning it is so great to worship with you. Today is the third week of the Advent season. Next Sunday we will celebrate Christmas Sunday together.

And I just want to address something as we get started on today's message. Dad started our Advent series two weeks ago and as part of his introduction he spoke about some memories of his regarding advent calendars (**PIC OF ADVENT CALENDAR**) and how and why they are significant, even special to him. And some really generous person in our congregation was impacted by his message, and went out bought him an advent calendar. Isn't that cool? I just thought, "Wow what a thoughtful person to remember Dad and his sermon like that." So I thought I would just begin by telling all of you this morning that there is nothing more special or sentimental to me at Christmas time than 72 inch high def plasma televisions. I'm just kidding.

In all seriousness, we do hope that you have been challenged by this sermon series over the past few weeks and that it will bring up thoughts, outside of our Sunday morning, that will impact the way you do Christmas and the way you think about the Christmas story. I mean the story of Christmas is one you hear every year and it's just so easy to not think about how that story should be impacting your life.

I was actually thinking, you know, that for many of us when we think about Jesus coming, we often think...Jesus comes, to get us out of this world. The earth is

messed up, sin has broken everything and so Jesus comes to get me out of this world and into heaven someday.

But the Christmas Story, in many ways, teaches exactly the opposite. The central focus of Christmas is not you going, rather it's Jesus coming.

And that's why we are calling our Christmas series **Heaven came down (SERIES GRAPHIC)**. This is just really important for followers of Jesus to understand. See, if Christmas is not about me going, but about heaven coming, it changes the way I live.

Your perspective, the way you think about the Christmas story, can change everything.

Maps:

One of my favorite authors talks about maps of the world (Ortberg). Have you looked at a map of the world? Did you ever notice that on almost every map we are familiar with, the US and Europe are on top and Africa and South America are on the bottom? Did you ever think about why that is?

There are various reasons, and today, some of it has to do with the concept of a "magnetic north." But one of the most significant reasons is called "ego-centricity." Every map is created from a certain **perspective**. And a general rule of thumb in map-making is "whoever made the map, is able to emphasize whatever they think is most important."

Most maps that we are familiar with were created by American's and Europeans and we like to put ourselves on the top. It is our perspective. It's what we want to emphasize.

I used to have a T-shirt said, "**A birds-eye view of the world...**" It was a picture from up above, looking down, as if a bird was flying. But the humor was that

everything below had a red target on it. Perspectives matter. The way you think about the meaning of the Christmas story matters. Is it about you getting to heaven? Or is it about heaven coming down? And to help us answer that question this morning...I want to talk about a concept or the progression of a concept that you find in your Bible.

A. Jewish Temple Theology

And I'd actually like to begin by going back to the Old Testament. You see, even before Jesus came, God had already begun the invasion of heaven on earth. For the Jews, the picture, the indicator of Heaven on earth was a building....the Temple (**Pic of temple**).

In fact, during the Middle Ages, until the 1300's many Jewish maps actually looked like this (**PIC OF MAP with Jewish Temple at center**). Placing Jerusalem at the center of the world. It reflected a theological rather than geographical perspective that the city of Jerusalem and particularly the temple were at the center of the universe.

Bible scholar N. T. Wright talks about ancient Israel's view of the world. He says, they would think about heaven and earth not as two completely separate spheres, but that they actually overlap and interlock, and for Israel, that overlapping was the Temple.

There's heaven (**PIC OF HEAVEN SPHERE**), the place where God dwells. It's this realm that represents good and right. It's the place that represents, peace and joy, justice, and hope. And there's the earth (**PIC OF EARTH SPHERE**). But it's broken, it's gotten out of control. It's infected by sin and hurt and sickness and violence. But rather than removing us from the brokenness, God decides to put heaven right down into the brokenness. So God took up residence at the Temple. The temple was

kind of like the symbol of God breaking back into this world...this is actually the place where heaven and earth interlock.

It's really fascinating, go the whole way back to the book of Exodus. Moses has just led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the Sinai desert. Listen to what happens...

Exodus 33 - ⁷ Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp.

In other words, this little tent, in the middle of the Sinai desert becomes God's home. Isn't that awesome, God decided in this one tiny little place on earth, people could get a glimpse of what it would be like for heaven to invade earth.

In fact a few chapters later you read this...

Exodus 40:34 - ³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

The Israelites started to refer to this little tent as the tabernacle (**PIC OF TABERNACLE**). You've heard that word before. It's the Hebrew word that literally means dwelling place...the tabernacle was God's dwelling place on earth. Heaven came down.

Now fast forward, when Israel entered the Promised Land and settled down and the tabernacle becomes a permanent building called the temple (**PIC OF TEMPLE**).

But you see why the Temple is so significant to the Jews. It was not just a building, it was the place where God's presence was invading earth.

In fact, the Temple itself was divided into three sections. The Jews believed that God's presence was most significant in the innermost room called the **Holy of Holies**.

Only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies and only once a year, on "Yom Kippur (the day of atonement)." Why was the inner room so sacred? Because they believed that somehow God's presence lived in that little inner room.

ILLUSTRATION

We still have remnants of this thinking in our world today. Many people kind of imagine the church as the place where God lives. Many of us, even without realizing it, only think about God being at church or when we're in church.

I read a letter one time, it was a little boy writing to God and he wrote, "*Dear God, "If you watch in church on Sunday, I will show you my new shoes."* As if God could only see those shoes when the kid was at church.

It's why sometimes people will say there are certain things you shouldn't do in church. It's kind of like God might see you at church.

You see why the temple was the center of Jewish life. If you want to meet with God, know God, interact with God...you go to the temple.

Because God's presence was at the temple, I just want you to think about some of significant things that happened at the Temple. What it represented.

It was the place where the Arc of the covenant was kept, the 10 Commandments, the contract that God had made with his people was kept. **The laws** about how Israel was supposed to do life and live in relationship to God and others were kept there. What does fairness and justice look like? Go to the temple and find out.

It was the place where **sacrifices** happened. Sacrifices were the way in which **people were made right with God**. It was the place where your **sins get forgiven** and **healing** happened. (Heaven on earth.)

It was the place people brought their **offerings**. In other words it was place Israel learned about **generosity and sharing**.

It was the place where **circumcision** happened. You're probably wondering why we bring that up in church. Don't worry not going into details on that, but the purpose of circumcision was all about **identity** as Yahweh's people. Being set apart and chosen. In fact it was at this time that Jews, were given a name. In other words, it was at the temple received an identity, a purpose in life.

God has a presence on earth, the heaven sphere is invading the world sphere...it's represented most by the tabernacle and the temple, the laws.

Fast forward to the New Testament (Luke 1)...something incredible begins to happen with the Jewish temple theology. I just want to read part of the Christmas story from Luke 1...

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

You've heard this story before...but do you the significance of the Angel's announcement to Mary? The Angel is telling Mary...You are going to give birth to the Messiah.

And as the Messiah grows from a baby, to a little boy and then into a man, something incredible begins to happen with Jewish Temple Theology.

In fact, it's fascinating the connection the writers of the New Testament make between Jesus and the Temple. It happens time and time again...

One of the few stories about Jesus as a child is when Mary and Joseph are looking for him. Do you remember where they find Jesus? They find him in the Temple. And he says, **“Did you not know I would be in my father's house?”**

There's another time, Jesus is breaking Sabbath laws...He's breaking the temple commandments...and the religious leaders scold him for breaking Temple laws...You're breaking the laws at God's house and Jesus says, **“One greater than the temple is here.”**

At another time Jesus is foretelling his death and resurrection and talks about it by referencing the Temple he says...

“I will destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.”

In his famous Sermon on the Mount...Jesus says, **“I have come not abolish the law and the prophets...but to fulfill them”**

In fact Matthew writes this, about the moment when Jesus died, on the cross..

Matthew 27:51 - ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The Holy of Holies is opened up by Jesus. Jewish temple theology was taking an incredible turn of events.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is talking and acting as if the whole idea of the temple was to point to him. He is talking as if everything the temple was a picture of was actually coming true now that he had arrived on earth. He is claiming that in his own person, in his life, in his teachings, in his little community, in his body, in his actions, finally, heaven was invading earth.

(Ortberg)

In fact, Bill referenced this one passage of Scripture last week from the book of John 1, we read this really fascinating description of Jesus. **“The Word was God...and became flesh...and made it’s dwelling among us.”**

That word dwelling is the Greek word **SKENE** and it literally means **tent**, comes from the Hebrew word tabernacle...literally John says, Jesus “tabernacled” among us. This is not a coincidence, John knows exactly what he is saying...

John says, “Jesus is the new tabernacle. Jesus is God’s presence among us.” That’s why...

He will be called Immanuel, “God with us.”

You see Christmas reminds us that our faith, is not mostly about us getting up to heaven. It’s about Heaven coming down. But this time not in a tent, not in a building, not in stone tablets or a list of laws.

Sometimes we give the impression that our faith is about following a religious system or believing certain concepts and idea. So many people think it’s going to church, following the right rules so you can be a good person, make God happy and go up to

heaven someday. But Christmas should remind us that Heaven is invading earth as humble little person.

Now here's why all of this matters to you and me. This whole temple theology goes one step further...

Listen to what Paul writes...

2 Corinthians - **¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?**

Jesus says, when you join me, when you accept me...YOU become the temple? You become the dwelling place of God. You become the place where heaven invades earth. Just pause for moment and let that settle in your brain. If you thought, following Jesus was just some nice, polite way of getting to the fluffy pleasure factory in the sky, or the eternal church service. You completely misunderstood what it means to give your life to Jesus. You become the temple. You are Heaven's invasion.

And I just want to say two really practical things about that concept.

So often, the church has a tendency of making people feel like they need to become acceptable for God. Gotta get your life in order and then Jesus can come and live with you. So many people feel "unworthy", unfit to be the dwelling place of God. Or unworthy, unfit to show up at church.

What you need to remember is that time and time again throughout history...

1. God's presence comes to the most humble of dwellings.

In fact, I just love this, God first lived in a tent. That was the tabernacle. God traveled through the Sinai desert in a little shepherds tent (**PIC OF TABERNACLE**).

If you've ever been tent camping you kind of realize that tenting isn't the most prestigious dwelling place. My family still does tent camping every summer. I remember when Jenny and I got serious about our relationship, invited her camping with us. She said, "Sure like in a camper with air conditioning and a mattress and running water and cable?" I said, "No, campers are NOT biblical. When God first lived in this world he lived in a tent without all those luxuries. God wouldn't live in a camper, camping in a camper is sinful. We tent camp as a reminder of God's presence." She said, "How near is the closest hotel?"

But, don't you love that? God's looking for a place to live. Could have lived in a palace like pharaoh, could have lived in a beach house, instead the Creator picks a tent. And this theme of humble dwellings just continues...

When God was ready to enter as person, it was through a young, peasant girl, a female in ancient Rome. She's way too young. She's pregnant, out of wedlock, claiming to be a virgin. She is a disgrace in her community, Jewish law gave her husband the right to divorce her and the possibility of stoning. Christmas story says, heaven enters in the humblest of forms.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager and in the presence of a carpenter.

This baby had overlooked the universe. These rags keeping him warm were the robes of eternity. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a dirty sheep pen. And worshiping angels had been replaced with kind but bewildered shepherds.

Even the secular Christmas world gets hints of this concept. One of the most famous characters at Christmas is reindeer with a red nose. Did you ever watch the

Christmas movie Rudolph (**PIC OF MOVIE COVER**)? Rudolph runs away from home because his nose lights up, he's made fun of. And so he runs away and ends up on this Island of misfit toys. It's all the mistaken, not quite good enough toys that didn't quite measure up. There's a kite that is afraid of heights. There's a "Charlie in the box" instead of Jack. There's an elf who wants to be a dentist instead of making toys. I mean the only thing missing from the Island of misfit toys are Eagles fans and Cowboys fans. But, do you know in the end it's the misfit toys who embody the true heart of Christmas and actually save Christmas!

I mean that's just a great picture of how God works in this world. If you ever wondered what the church is all about, that it right there. We're kind of like a group of misfit toys, every single one of us. Not quite right, far from perfect. That's the church, the Island of misfit toys. Don't have to get cleaned up, don't have to get your life in order, don't need degrees, don't need money, or perfect relationships...don't even need to understand everything and have all of the answers. Heaven is invading earth...and God looks us and our lives misfit lives and says, "Yeah, I can start with you."

Second thing and I just want to be really clear about this.

2. What does it mean to be God's temple?

When heaven invades earth through me...what does that look like? Do I start glowing, wear white, with wings and a halo? Do I become really spiritual all of a sudden and pray for hours all day long? Do I start singing spiritual songs at work and carry around a Bible?

I just want to be really specific about this...mostly heaven invading earth looks like, all the things the Temple stood for and that were then embodied and lived out by Jesus.

You become the place of forgiveness and healing and justice to the broken world. You become the place of generous sharing to those in need. You become the safe place where people can be their true authentic selves and not be rejected. But rather can find identity and purpose in life. You accept tax collectors and fisherman and Samaritan women standing by wells. You forgive prostitutes and traitors. You notice the poor and the lonely. You cry with those who are hurting and walk beside those struggling with addictions.

There's a really awesome story where some

Luke 7 - men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

What does the Messiah look like? What does heaven on earth look like as a person?

...he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[a] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

You become a picture of Jesus Sermon on the Mount. And we're gonna spend several weeks next year specifically talking about that sermon.

But basically, Jesus says...I came to heal brokenness, forgive sins and hurt, serve those in need, to love the unlovable. I came to free people from greed and lust. I came to bring the season of advent...to replace despair with hope. Sadness with joy. Hate with peace. That's what the invasion of heaven on earth is all about. That's what the temple was supposed to be a picture of. That's what Jesus did and that's what we do:

Every time we feed the hungry. It's heaven invading earth.

Every time we are patient with a co-worker.

Every time we choose honesty over deceit.

Every time we choose gentle language with our kids.

Every time we forgive someone who hurts us.

Every time we befriend and include someone who is lonely.

Every time we fight the temptation battle and choose purity over lust...we are participating in heaven's invasion.

We are giving our world a new map, a new way of seeing the world, that puts Jesus at the center of the invasion.

Wow, what an awesome message for our world to hear right now. Christmas isn't about you getting up to heaven. It's about heaven invading earth through you.