

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 14, 2008)

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Rushing to Christmas!

(Jesus themes)

Who is This Jesus?

(Philippians 2:5-8)

Study #2

Introduction: A metaphor for our time...

Upward mobility is fun. It is certainly the preferred trajectory of our lives and many of us have been conditioned to expect an upwardly mobile life.

We “graduate” from Preschool and move on to Kindergarten, Elementary School, Middle School and High School. We may graduate from High School and go to college and then, perhaps, to more schooling.

We expect to begin with odd summer jobs, launch a career and then move up the ladder to better and better jobs. We move from our first rental to a “starter” home to a larger home. You get the idea. Upward mobility.

Upward mobility is wonderful. It is to live a dream - specifically, the **American dream**. These days, some Americans are waking from that dream to a harsher reality, the reality of downward mobility.

The evidence is overwhelming that the trend toward downward mobility may be increasing.

- The big brokerage firms that defined Wall Street are no more;
- The stock market has lost from a third to a half of its value over the past year fifteen months;
- After having enjoyed unprecedented low unemployment rates, those rates have now risen above 6%;

- General Motors, Chrysler and Ford are all in a bind, seemingly on the verge of bankruptcy, joining many others who have filed or are considering filing for bankruptcy protection;
- Many, many homeowners are struggling to pay their mortgage;
- Retail sales have dropped for five months straight;
- Nationwide, home values dropped 9% in the third quarter.

The results are in. We are officially in a recession. And while many have not yet felt the pain, it is expected that most of us will. Many economists are telling us that most of us will taste downward mobility.

Downward mobility is nowhere near as much fun as upward mobility. The downwardly mobile man or woman is forced to adjust to a changing set of circumstances.

New limitations may be imposed. There will be different standards of living. Freedoms to travel and spend are reduced. The downwardly mobile person may have to work more hours - and may have to work hard to find a job that pays the bills.

Downward mobility sometimes leads to a reduction in social status. Real suffering may follow in the wake of a downward trajectory.

And a consideration of downward mobility leads to a consideration of Christmas. That is because Christmas reveals Jesus on a downwardly mobile course that He set for Himself.

There are only a finite number of Bible texts that are particularly appropriate for Christmas. Of the four Gospels, Mark alone does not give us a “Christmas story.”

So, preachers often go to the wells of Matthew and Luke. We also go to John, of course, who gives us that wonderful story of “the Word.” As we saw last week, John tells us that *[1:14] the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

But the Christmas text that I want to highlight this morning is not linked to the birth narratives.¹ The Christmas passage I want to explore with you this morning is found in the second chapter of the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi.

Orienting to Philippians

Philippians is one of Paul's most delightful writings. He clearly loved the folks in this church - and they loved him.

He wanted nothing but the best for them and his letter urges them to ***“walk in a manner worthy of their calling.”*** (1:27). Even though they were facing persecution for being Christians, not an uncommon experience, they were to ***“walk worthy.”***

He also told them that they were to see to it that loved flowed freely in the church. The second chapter begins with these words:

[2:1] Therefore if² there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, [2] make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. [3a] Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. [4] Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

There is no question that this is a tall order. Unselfish love and humility is a challenge. But this is the way life is to be in the church.

¹ Our memory verses for December bring the incarnation of Jesus to mind.

[Galatians 4:4] But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, [5] so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

² There are four different ways that a writer could make a conditional (“if...then”) statement in the Greek language of the first century (the language in which the New Testament was written). These different types of conditional sentences range in meaning from the wildly hypothetical to the rock solid certain. The grammatical form of the condition in verse 1 is of the “rock solid certain” type. It ASSUMES the truth of the statement in the first part of the sentence - meaning that the second part (found in verses 2-4) will follow as a matter of course. In Greek, this is called a first class conditional.

And then, as if to answer an unspoken question - like, ***“Show me the way!”*** - Paul points us, for an example, to the Lord Jesus Christ. He wants us to see THE JESUS WAY.

Imitate the Lord Jesus Christ (2:5)

[5] Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus

Imitation truly is the sincerest form of flattery. We imitate those we respect and admire.

Preachers want to preach like Chuck Swindoll. Basketball players want to score like Carmelo Anthony. Wide receivers want to run routes like Jerry Rice. Investors seek to imitate “the oracle of Omaha” Warren Buffett.

Well, the apostle Paul identifies Jesus as the ultimate role model. We are to imitate His attitude.

But we should be warned at the outset. Jesus' attitude was very un-American. He chose to embrace downward mobility. And the degree of descent into downward mobility Jesus chose is breathtaking.

Before we see how low He was willing to go, let's consider the height from which He began.

Downward Mobility - God's Way (2:6-8)

Jesus - No Grasping! (v. 6)

Jesus was truly and fully God (v. 6a)

[6] who, although HE EXISTED IN THE FORM³ OF GOD did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped⁴

That's a mouthful! Jesus ***“existed in the form of God”***. By that comment Paul means to tell us that Jesus was, at the most basic level, God.

³ The word “form” is a crucial term here.³ “*Form*” stresses the inner essence of something - what it REALLY is.

⁴ The actual words denote an act of seizing, as in robbery.

Don't miss this. Here, Paul carefully states Jesus' essential deity.

This has been the common confession of Christians for 2,000 years: that the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, raised in Galilee, and killed in Jerusalem was - really and truly - God.⁵

Let that mind-blowing comment sink in. Sometimes, in Scripture we see people who allowed it to "sink in."

For instance, in John's Gospel (chapter 8), Jesus made a claim to deity that infuriated the Jewish rulers. It moved them to accuse Him of blasphemy (even though they had seen Him validate that claim, and prove His deity through miracle after miracle after miracle).

He didn't back down. Instead, He ramped up the intensity by looking them square in the face, and saying, "*Before Abraham was born, I AM.*" Nobody missed what He was saying. Standing before them, He was claiming to be the Jehovah of the Old Testament, in the flesh!⁶

John goes on to tell us [5:18] *For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.*⁷

Point #1: Jesus, without question and without stuttering claimed to be God in the flesh.

Obviously, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Chief Priests and the Scribes of Jesus' day were opposed to His claim to be God. And certainly there are many who do not believe in Christ's deity today.

And, you know, I sympathize with anyone who has trouble swallowing Jesus' claim to be God. It is an audacious claim!

⁵ This is a reference to both the state of God the Son had as He existed in eternity past, and to the nature of the historical Christ.

⁶ In fact, the argument of the New Testament throughout is that Jesus is God. In John 10:30, He said, "*I and the Father are One.*" In Matthew 26:63-65, Jesus says, "*You shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.*" - a clear claim to be God.

⁷ The significance of "son" in the Ancient Near Eastern culture: denoted not subordination, but equality and identity of nature.

But, if you don't believe that He is God, you'll have to at least admit that the best record of His life we have (the Bible) tells us that He did claim to be God. And if He claimed to be God and was, in fact, NOT God, well, that is troubling.

And if He claimed to be God and was not God, there are only two alternatives...

Point #2: If Jesus was not God, then He either knew He wasn't God, or He didn't know He wasn't God.

If Jesus knew that His claims to be God were false, then He made a deliberate misrepresentation of the facts. He was a liar and a hypocrite. Worse than that, He was a fool, because He died for His false claims.

And, worst of all, He encouraged His followers to place their eternal destinies in His care. This makes Him culpable for the damnation of countless millions of professing Christians who have placed their hope for salvation in Him who was NOT God!

On the other hand, we have an even more pathetic situation if He did not know that His claims to be God were false

Worse than Don Quixote tilting at windmills thinking they are dragons, or the lunatic believing he is Napoleon, we have here a man who was convinced that He was Almighty God. That's the worse self-delusion you can imagine.

It is simply impossible to say about Christ's claims to be God, "*Well, at least He meant well. At least He was a good, moral teacher.*" Wrong!

Good, moral teachers who mean well don't go around saying that they are God; they don't invite others to entrust their souls to their care.; they don't offer forgiveness of sins and eternal life - unless they are God!

In the words of C.S. Lewis, "*You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a good moral teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.*"

The record of the Bible and the personal claims of Christ both converge on the central question: Is Jesus God? If He is, then He is the central Person with whom we each have to deal.

For myself, on the basis of His words and His works, I have come to believe this audacious claim. I am convinced that Jesus is God. And, if before this morning, you have never considered Jesus' claim to be God, then let me urge you to consider it seriously this morning.

Now, we might think that Christ's deity carries with it some predictable implications. God is sovereign and powerful. God is majestic.

Therefore, we might suspect that the Jesus we read about in the Gospels would be marked with the trappings of majesty. American Express tells us that "*Membership has its privileges*" Doesn't it follow that deity will have its privileges?

Not necessarily. At least not based on the picture we get of Jesus from the Bible.

Jesus did not grasp at His Deity (v. 6b)

[2:6] who, although He existed in the form of God, DID NOT REGARD EQUALITY WITH GOD A THING TO BE GRASPED⁸

Jesus was absolutely secure in who He was (God, the Son). After all, it was not as if someone could take His place as God. Jesus had not aspired to be God, didn't make it His aim to be God.

You don't work hard to be God. You either are God or you are not. And Jesus was God! There was no need for Him to grasp at deity as if it might have been lost.

So often, we see people today grasping at power and position and prominence.

Government leaders may stoop to remarkable depths to retain their power (current Exhibit A may be the Governor of Illinois). Church leaders may do the same thing, as may business leaders and leaders of families.

But, Christ's deity - hence His power and authority - could not be lost. And how did He deal with having more power and authority than anybody else in the world? He did not cling to that which was His by right to enjoy.

And having taken that first step of downward mobility, He continued the descent, moving from Heaven to the muck and mire of human experience on earth.

Jesus - Self-Emptying

(Merry Christmas - The Glory of the Incarnation!)

[7] BUT EMPTIED⁹ HIMSELF, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men

Jesus emptied Himself (v. 7a)

Reflect with me for a moment on that phrase. Paul says that Jesus "***emptied Himself.***" This brings to mind one of my favorite hymns, *And Can It Be*, written by the great Methodist song-writer, Charles Wesley, in 1738.

One of the stanzas of that hymn brings tears to my eyes just about every time I sing it:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and death's dark night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee!*

But, one of the stanzas contains what may be among the most unfortunate statements we find in any hymn.

*He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
EMPTIED HIMSELF OF ALL BUT LOVE,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.*

⁸ The words denote an act of seizing, as in robbery.

⁹ In fact, even the translation "emptied" is not helpful. "Veiled" might be better.

“Emptied Himself of all but love.” Really? Did Jesus empty Himself of everything except love? Was the only thing left after He came from Heaven to earth **LOVE**? What do those words, “*emptied Himself*” actually mean?

He emptied Himself of Deity

Some who read these words come to the conclusion that when Jesus was born He was emptied of deity. That is, that in the descent from Heaven to earth, the Son of God lost the essential “form” of God, and became something other than, and something less than, God.

But this idea - that Jesus emptied Himself of deity - runs counter to the words and claims of Jesus Himself and to the record of His life. And it begs the question, “*How can God no longer be God?*”

Jesus claimed to be God while He walked the earth. And on numerous occasions he backed up the claim by doing things that only God could do - giving sight to the blind, cleansing lepers, raising the dead.

No, Jesus did not empty Himself of Deity! So, of what did Jesus empty Himself?

He emptied Himself of the prerogatives of Deity

He emptied Himself but of the benefits and of the prerogatives of deity. While He was on the earth Jesus laid aside:

- omnipresence and took upon Himself the limitations of time and space;
- omniscience and chose to limit His knowledge;
- omnipotence and willingly limited His power.

As God, He had all the rights of Deity, and yet during the 33 years of His flesh and blood life, He didn't enjoy the benefits of being God.¹⁰

How counter-cultural is that!

¹⁰ Thus, we believe that Jesus exercised voluntary non-use of some of His attributes of Deity some of the time while He was on earth! He certainly didn't empty Himself of Deity.

The prevailing winds of our own times have deified “personal rights.” There seems to be nothing so sacred as the exercise of the rights we as individuals believe are ours. (And, have you noticed, as I have, that the list of “unalienable rights” seems to be growing year by year?)

Yet during the years that He walked this earth, Jesus did not insist that He benefit from the fact that He was God.

What He might have seized, He relinquished. What He could have grasped, He released. And He voluntarily submitted to the limitations of humanity.

And, here in Philippians - surprise! - we find ourselves thinking about Christmas.

Jesus took the form of a bond-servant, and was made in the likeness of man. (v. 7b)

[7] but emptied Himself, TAKING THE FORM OF A BOND-SERVANT, AND BEING MADE IN THE LIKENESS OF MEN

Down to the level of humanity

The quickest road I know to an Excedrin headache is to try to envision the descent of God to earth, and the fusing of Divinity with humanity.¹¹ But this is a clear reference to the birth of the baby at Bethlehem.

As great a theologian as J.I. Packer says, without apology, “*The incarnation is the hardest of all biblical miracles to believe.*” - to which I say, “AMEN!”

¹¹ The Athanasian Creed from the early church state, “*Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man... perfect God, and perfect man...who although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ; one not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God.*”

What the Son of God had experienced in Heaven was nowhere to be found on earth. And, there was no point of reference or comparison between what He found on earth and what had been His for all eternity in Heaven.

At birth, He immediately tasted the cold night air, knew the smell of the barnyard and felt the scratch of hay in His makeshift cradle.

Early in life, He would have experienced scorn because of His supposed illegitimate birth. He tasted all of the hardships of growing up in a poor family in ancient Palestine.

But Jesus' downward mobility continued past simply being born in a stable. In His life as a man, He descended to the lowest level of society - the level of a servant.¹²

Down to the level of servant

When Paul speaks of Jesus as a servant, he is pointing to the Lord's unswerving commitment to serve the humanity He Himself had created.¹³

Read through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and you'll see Jesus, the consummate Servant. And while we could draw on a vast reservoir of anecdotes from the Gospels to show that he "*took the form of a bond-servant*" one stands out as the most graphic illustration.

On the night of His betrayal, John tells us, *[John 13:2] During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, [3] Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, [4] got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. [5] Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.*

¹² Here, again, we find the word "form" (*morphe*), which indicates perfect congruity with Jesus' essential nature and that of a human servant.

¹³ Especially is His position lowly and humble in comparison with His pre-incarnate glory!

The literal story is quite amazing. The Lord Jesus washed the grit and grime from the filthy, sandal-clad feet of twelve grown men.

But the story also pictures the journey Jesus took from Heaven to earth when He emptied Himself of the rights of being God, laid aside His glory, and became one of us to serve each of us.

Jesus Christ did not move from Heaven to earth so that He could become known as the world's greatest and wisest ruler, or so that He could boss people around. He moved from glory down so that He could become the world's greatest Servant.

So, He humbled Himself to the point of enduring the **normal** sufferings of mortal man - and chose as well to endure the **abnormal** sufferings of mortal man.¹⁴

Jesus - On the Ladder's Bottom Rung

[8] Being found in appearance as a man, HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF BY BECOMING OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH, EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS.

The second chapter of Philippians takes us on a quick trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from the cradle to the cross.

- He **began** humbly, coming from Heaven to earth.
- He **continued** humbling Himself by serving.
- He **concluded** His humiliation by submitting to death.
- He **emphasized** His humiliation by dying on the cross.¹⁵

Now all of us will die. Nobody gets out of this life alive, and along with the payment of taxes, death is the one great certainty.

¹⁴ The final descent of Jesus is seen in verse 8. Bible scholar A.T. Robertson calls these verses "*the ultimate description of Jesus' descent from the throne of God to the bottom rung of the human ladder.*"

¹⁵ I use the term "humiliation" not in the sense that Jesus was personally and emotionally humiliated, but in the objective sense in which He humbly lowered Himself to the depths of human experience. I certainly do not mean to imply that Jesus was embarrassed, ashamed, or had anything to be ashamed of.

But Jesus' death was not a death in the way that most of us will taste it. His death was the death of shame, the death of a curse, a death involving the most heinous suffering imaginable.

In the Roman Empire, this type of death was reserved only for non-Romans who were considered the worst of criminals.

In the ears of the Philippian church members, this mention of the cross would have sounded horrible and disgusting. Crucifixion was not even mentioned in polite company.

Crucifixion. Excruciating.

According to the Romans, Jesus died as the lowliest criminal; according to the Jews, He died under the condemnation of God. The death of Jesus on the cross marked the lower limit of Christ's life as downwardly mobile Servant.

But, the power and wisdom of God is seen in that His death provided for the salvation of sinners.

Listen to the words of the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, as he looked forward to the death of Jesus on the cross from six hundred years before the event:

*[53:4] Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
[5] But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
[6] All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.*

So, today we have traveled from the highest height to the deepest depth; from the light of God's glory in Heaven from which the Son of God came, to the darkness of death on a cross.

But, Paul isn't finished! In the very next breath, Jesus rockets back up the ladder, from the bottom rung, to the highest height!

The Upwardly Mobile Jesus - God's Way! (vv. 9-11)

[9] For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The sovereignty which was His for the taking, but which He refused to grasp at while He was on earth; the sovereignty which the devil offered Him (Matthew 4) but He rejected, will in the end be freely given to Him by the Father.

“**LORD**” is Jesus' most august title. And, for the past 2,000 years, the confessional slogan of the church has been, “**Jesus Christ is LORD.**”

And as Lord, He has the authority to offer salvation to anyone who trusts in Him!

Conclusion:

Amazing. In one morning we have moved:

- From the birth of Jesus to the death of Jesus;
- From Bethlehem, to Jerusalem;
- From the cradle to the cross - and beyond!

And the reason Jesus went through His “emptying” was so that you might become gloriously “full”! Or, as Paul puts it in another place,

[2 Cor. 5:21] He made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Having seen what you have seen of Jesus, won't you recognize Him as the Lord He is and trust Him for your salvation?