

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Christmas Prep: Downward Mobility**

A Christmas story of riches to rags to riches

(Philippians 2:5-11)

#### **Introduction: A metaphor for our time...**

Upward mobility is fun. It is certainly the life preferred trajectory 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 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, it is to live “The American Dream.”

Over the last two to three years, though, many 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 with us for a while.

Officially, we are no longer in a recession. But for many people, it sure feels like one.

With unemployment continuing to hover around 10% and many homeowners still struggling to make mortgage payments, and businesses not hiring and the national debt climbing, lots of economists are telling us all to get used to the idea of downward mobility.

Downward mobility is nowhere near as much fun as upward mobility. The downwardly mobile family or individual has to adjust to new realities.

There will be limitations. There will be a different standard of living. There will be fewer freedoms to travel and spend.

The downwardly mobile person may have to work more hours and may have to work hard to find a job that pays the bills. Various other sufferings may follow in the wake of a downwardly mobile trajectory.

“Rags to riches” stories are our preference, but “riches to rags” stories also happen. On this, the Sunday before the Sunday before Christmas, since we’re thinking about Jesus’ birth, we’re thinking about downward mobility.

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. Or we may turn to John, who gives us that wonderful story of “the Word.”

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 from the Gospels. There are no angels or shepherds or wise men in this passage. No mangers or animals, mad kings, or inns with no vacancies.

Still, lacking all of that, our passage for this morning is perfectly fit for Christmas because it shows Jesus on a radical, self-imposed downwardly mobile course. And that course is what Christmas is REALLY all about.

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**

The Christians who made up the church in the city of Philippi had experienced a fair share of persecution for their faith. So, one of the reasons for writing the letter was to encourage these believers to stay strong in Jesus, despite their suffering.

That would have been a timely message.

Whenever someone finds himself in the throes of suffering, it can be tempting to forget that *"to live is Christ."* (Philippians 1:21).

The temptation can be strong to focus all attention on personal needs. For many of us in times of stress, our need for relief and our need for comfort and our need for support becomes our focus.

Paul calls these folks in another direction entirely. He told them that they were to love and to serve each other.

*[2:1] Therefore if 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. [3] 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.*

That is a tall order for anyone and it is an especially tall order for a bunch of people who are suffering.

*"Practice unselfish love and focus more on the needs of others than on yourself"* - very challenging indeed!

If you're thinking what they were thinking upon reading those verses, you're probably thinking something like, *"How in the world can I do that? Show me the way!"*

Anticipating that thought, Paul has a response: Look to Jesus.

### **Imitate the Lord Jesus Christ (2:5)**

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

Imitation being the sincerest form of flattery, we are called to imitate Jesus. Generally, we imitate those we respect and admire.

I've been preaching and teaching for quite a while now, and for just about the whole time I've been listening, on and off, to Chuck Swindoll. Chuck is a fantastic preacher. For my money, he is about the most effective communicator of God's truth I have had the privilege of hearing. If I'm not careful I'll catch myself in a Swindoll-ism. I will freely admit it. I sometimes want to preach like Chuck.

I watch young sons follow their dads on Sunday mornings here at church and am amazed at how they walk like Dad. They talk like Dad.

They'll grow up to throw a ball like Dad. Dads are role models and they get imitated by the next generation.

Paul says that there was something about an attitude Jesus maintained that each one of us here is to imitate.

But we should be warned at the outset. Jesus' attitude was very un-American. His attitude was counter-cultural, even counter-intuitive. Jesus embraced downward mobility. And the degree of descent into downward mobility Jesus chose is breathtaking.

You and I will never appreciate the level to which He descended until we understand the height from which He began.

### **Jesus' Downward Mobility (2:6-8)**

#### **Jesus - No Grasping! (v. 6)**

*Jesus was truly, fully God (v. 6a)*

**[6] who, although HE EXISTED IN THE FORM<sup>1</sup> OF GOD**

That's a mouthful! Paul means to tell us that Jesus was, at the most basic level, God.

This has been the confession of all Christians for two thousand years: that the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem was - really and truly - God in the flesh. Let that mind-blowing comment sink in.

We see a few choice examples in the Gospels when people allowed the truth of Jesus' divinity to sink in.

For instance, in John's Gospel (chapter 8), Jesus made a claim to deity that infuriated some of the religious rulers of the day.

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<sup>1</sup> The word "form" is a crucial term here.<sup>1</sup> "Form" stresses the inner essence of something - what it REALLY is.

They clearly "got" what He was saying and accused Him of blasphemy on account of that claim.

In response, Jesus didn't back down. He didn't say, "*You thought I was saying that I'm God? Oh, you must have misunderstood.*"

No! He ramped up the intensity of the claim by looking them square in the face, and saying, "***Before Abraham was born, I AM.***"

Nobody there that day missed what He was saying. He was claiming to be the Yahweh/Jehovah of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of John's Gospel the Apostle Thomas "got it" when he saw the resurrected Jesus in an upper room in Jerusalem and responded, **[John 20:28] "My lord and my God."**

Here is something we simply cannot ignore about Jesus. Without question and without stuttering, He claimed to be God.<sup>3</sup>

The apostles all came to understand. That's why they placed their faith in him. And the Pharisees, Sadducees, Chief Priests and Scribes of Jesus' day all understood His claim to be God. That's why they tried to kill Him!

At some level they WOULD NOT believe. And at another level, even with all of the miracles Jesus performed, they COULD NOT bring

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> As one of our best known Christmas carols says it, "veiled in flesh, the Godhead see..."

themselves to believe that the Jesus they interacted with and saw walking the roads of Palestine was God incarnate.

Frankly, I sympathize with someone who has trouble swallowing Jesus' claim to be God. It is an audacious claim.

But, if we don't buy His claim to be God (and the best record of His life we have - the Bible - tells us that He did claim to be God), well, that's troubling...

It means that Jesus either claimed to be God and *knew* He wasn't God (making Him a bald-faced liar) or that He claimed to be God and *didn't know* that He wasn't God (making Him an incalculably dangerous madman).

The one thing we cannot say about Jesus is, "*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 - 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 His audacious claim. I have come to believe that Jesus is God.

And today, the question comes to you: Will you allow Jesus' claims AND His miracles AND His words to convince you that He was and is God in the flesh?

Simply examine the evidence and I believe that you will be overwhelmed by that evidence. And overwhelmed you will be drawn to trust, worship, and obey Jesus, the God-man.

Now, as God, Jesus holds the most prestigious position in the universe. He is at the top of creation's pecking order.

And in our world, those who live at the top of the pyramid expect some privileges. No matter what arena you may have in mind - military, academics, business, sports - the top echelon leader gets perks.

Like American Express tells us, "*Membership has its privileges.*" It would certainly seem to follow that Deity would have its privileges.

Given that, we might expect to find Jesus dressed in royal robes and decked out with all the trappings of majesty when He came to earth.

But that is not at all what we find.

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

***[2:6] who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped<sup>4</sup>***

Have you ever seen someone "grasp" at power? At prestige? At prominence? At position? It's not a pretty sight.

Jesus didn't grasp at deity.

He wasn't concerned that he be God. He had never made it His aim to be God. He didn't aspire to be God. He didn't work hard to be God.

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<sup>4</sup> The words denote an act of seizing, as in robbery.

That's not the way it works. You can aspire to be the president of a company and you can aspire to run a six minute mile. But you can't aspire to be God. You either are God or you are not God.

And Jesus was God. There was no need for Him to grasp at deity as if it might have been lost. He held His deity with an open hand knowing that it could not be taken away.

So, how did Jesus deal with having more power and authority than anybody else in the world? By a bold act of un-clinging and by self-emptying.

### **Jesus - Self-Emptying**

*(Merry Christmas - The Glory of the Incarnation!)*

***[7] BUT EMPTIED<sup>5</sup> 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.***"

What do those words, "***emptied Himself***" actually mean?

#### Option #1: 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.

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, even the translation "emptied" is not helpful. "Veiled" might be better.

But this idea - that Jesus emptied Himself of deity - runs smack into the brick wall of His claims to be God. It runs into the wall of Jesus' miracle-performing ways. And it runs into the wall of the preposterous idea that God might cease to be God.

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 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. Yet during the 33 years of His flesh and blood life, He didn't enjoy the benefits of being God.<sup>6</sup>

How counter-cultural is that?!

We Americans have it built into our DNA that we have certain inalienable rights, given to us by God. These rights are ours and we will fight for them.

Fine.

Yet here is God in the flesh, Jesus, NOT fighting for the rights He could have demanded. During the years that He walked this earth, Jesus did not insist that He benefit from the fact that He was God.

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

And that is how, right here in Philippians, we find ourselves thinking about Christmas.

*Jesus became a servant (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 a migraine is to try to envision the descent of God to earth, and the fusing of divinity with humanity.<sup>7</sup> But this (v. 7) is a clear reference to the birth of the Baby at Bethlehem.

As great a theologian as J.I. Packer says it this way, *“The incarnation is the hardest of all biblical miracles to believe.”* AMEN!

The glory and the majesty of what the Son of God had experienced in Heaven was nowhere to be found on earth. And, there was no point of 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, experienced 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.”*

Merry Christmas, indeed! Paul’s words in Philippians 2 invite us to reflect on the miracle of the Incarnation. We are reminded that Jesus’ arrival was a miracle of self-humbling and downward mobility.

And that downward mobility continued past simply being born in a stable. His descent continued to the lowest level of society, the level of a servant.<sup>8</sup>

Down to the level of servant

When Paul speaks of Jesus as a servant, he is emphasizing the Lord’s unswerving commitment to serve the humanity He Himself had created.<sup>9</sup>

Read through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and you’ll find a beautiful portrait of 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 from the rest.

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.***

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

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<sup>8</sup> Here, again, we find the word "form" (*morphe*), which indicates perfect congruity with Jesus' essential nature and that of a human servant.

<sup>9</sup> Especially is His position lowly and humble in comparison with His pre-incarnate glory!

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.

Jesus never intended to move from Heaven to earth so that He could boss people around. He moved here to become the world's greatest Servant.

So, He humbled Himself to the point of enduring the normal sufferings of mortal man. But He went beyond the normal and agreed to endure the worst a man could suffer.<sup>10</sup>

### **Jesus - on the Ladder's Lowest 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 is amazing.

Here Paul takes us on a quick trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from the cradle to the cross. We learn that Jesus

- **began** humbly, coming from Heaven to earth;
- **continued** humbly, by serving; and
- **concluded** humbly, by submitting to a ghastly death.<sup>11</sup>

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.

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<sup>10</sup> 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.*"

<sup>11</sup> 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 first century, crucifixion was not even mentioned in polite company.

Crucifixion. Excruciating. The words are linked. And the death of Jesus on the cross marked the lower limit of Christ's life as a downwardly mobile Servant.

According to the Romans, Jesus died as the lowliest criminal; according to the Jews, He died under the condemnation of God.

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

Today we have traveled from the highest height to the deepest depth. Jesus came from the Heaven to a death on a cross. The whole story is of one piece. It is all the story of Incarnation, one, long, arduous, beautiful, descent from glory to earth.

But, Paul isn't finished tracing the career of Jesus, and neither are we!

In the very next breath, he follows Jesus from those deep depths to the pinnacle of the universe' highest height!

### **Jesus' Upward Mobility (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.*

That reference to “*every knee*” bowing before Jesus is a reference, I believe, to the time when He will return to set up an earthly reign. We call this The Second Coming of Christ and it is described in Revelation 19.

When He returns Jesus will be seen to be what He has always been, the King of kings and the Lord of Lords.

When He returns, 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.**”

### 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!

Jesus “emptied Himself” and He did so for a reason. It was so that you and I might become “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.*

As commendable as are the actions of those Undercover Bosses we enjoy watching who leave their executive suites to clean hotel rooms (Choice Hotels) or make sandwiches (Subways) Jesus went infinitely farther.

He emptied Himself of the privileges associated with DEITY so that you and I might become eternally full.

**THAT IS GOSPEL** - and it is the good news Jesus wants you to embrace and to enjoy today.