

Christmas

The self-communication of God to the world in the person of Jesus Christ as a child of Earth is the linchpin that holds together the whole adventure of the Christian faith.—Elizabeth A. Johnson¹

Festival History

Christmas is one of the oldest festivals in the Christian tradition. *Its purpose is to celebrate the birth of Jesus, God's Son, into the world of humanity. It is the premier festival of the divinity assuming human form.* The biblical foundation of the festival is based on prophetic texts from the Old Testament and on two nativity accounts in the New Testament in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The lectionary selection from the Gospel of John for Christmas Day is not derived from a nativity story, but is a text that describes the trinitarian implications of the nativity.

Christmas is the first of the church year's festivals chronologically. The fixing of all the principal festival dates, as we know them today, has a complicated and extended history. The festival of Christmas is no different in this respect. Even today there are different dates on which it is celebrated globally, such as in the Orthodox Church, which marks the observance in January. There are multiple factors that might have determined the dating of this feast, none of which has been established definitively.

Potential historical origins for celebrating the nativity on December 25 in the Western church can be found in Roman, liturgical, solar, and lunar calendars. Christmas could have been related to a Roman festival of some type or the winter solstice. It is possible December 25 was chosen as the date for the conclusion of a nine-month pregnancy, figuring calendrically from the commemoration of the annunciation in March.

Other factors are part of the mix as well. The theological content of the festivals unfolded more specifically as a result of regional, liturgical, and conciliar decisions established over the centuries. Local observances also made an impact in ecclesial decisions about what would be considered normative for a festival. One of the most significant sources for reading about any of the festivals' emphases is found in sermons from the early church. Over time, however, these emphases have shifted. For example, today's readers of Augustine's Christmas-season homilies would be struck by the penitential mood of his exhortations, including injunctions to fast and give alms.

In terms of chronological development, the celebration of the nativity as an official, specific calendrical date took close to three centuries to emerge. As with all the festivals, there are significant debates about which ancient manuscripts ultimately prove the current date of the festival. These disputes have remained unresolved. The establishment of Christmas as a festival did produce one enduring calendar innovation, that of establishing Christmas as the beginning of the church liturgical year itself.

The derivation of the Christmas festival is often linked in the early decades of the church to what was being celebrated by the majority religious populace, which is to say, the pagans. One frequent surmise about Christmas origins is this.

In the year 274, the emperor Aurelian introduced in the imperial capital the festival of the Invincible Sun, *Natalis Solis Invicti*, on 25 December. At some point before 336, the church must have established on this date the commemoration of the incarnation, the birth of the Sun of Righteousness.²

Extant documents that contain evidences of the Christmas festival come from its celebration in Rome. The earliest probable evidence is found in a Roman almanac that contains references both to the pagan celebrations as well as Christian ones. Based on this mixture of festivals, liturgical scholar Thomas Talley says:

This document is the Chronograph of 354, an almanac presenting (inter alia) lists of Roman holidays, consuls, city prefects, and two lists of burial dates, one of Roman bishops and the other of martyrs. . . . The first date given in the *Depositio Martyrum* is December 25, "VIII kla. Ian natus Christus in Betleem Iudee." . .

[Given historical information from] 336, then, we may say that at Rome, the nativity of Christ on December 25 marked the beginning of the liturgical year.³

How quickly did Christmas spread outside of Rome? According to Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson,

The earliest unquestionable testimony to its celebration outside Rome comes from a sermon delivered at the feast by Optatus, Bishop of Milevis in North Africa, probably around 361–3. This speaks of the nativity of Christ as being a *sacramentum*, thus bestowing on it a greater status than Augustine will grant to it at the end of the century, when he distinguishes Christmas as a mere commemoration (*memoria*) from Easter as a *sacramentum*.⁴

In the first three centuries of the church's development, major urban centers of Christian observance reflected differences in celebrating Christmas. These were further sharpened over the decades as Western (Latin-speaking) and Eastern (Greek-speaking) forms of the church emerged. Their diverse theological views and practices contributed to choices of different dates for the celebration.

Liturgical historian Dom Gregory Dix speaks of these various practices, derived in part from a woman's pilgrimage diary of the early church.

Christmas . . . had not yet been accepted at Jerusalem when Etheria visited the Holy City in 385; but it was just beginning to be observed at Constantinople and Antioch at about that time. Alexandria adopted it somewhere about A.D. 430, and Jerusalem followed suit soon after. The Eastern churches, from the third century in some cases, had already begun to observe a feast of our Lord's birthday on January 6th as "Epiphany," the feast of his "manifestation."⁵

With Christmas, we notice what is typical in the emergence of all the festivals; namely, that each is frequently understood in close partnership with a festival on either calendrical side of it, such as the pairing of Christmas with Epiphany. In some cases, one festival has been assumed into another completely, or one of the two of has migrated to a separate calendar date. Dix characterizes this tendency as "duplication of feasts,"⁶ and the evidence of this historical process is found for all six festivals.

A case in point is demonstrated in materials found in Etheria's pilgrimage. Her comments show Christmas in Jerusalem was conflated with Epiphany and thus celebrated on January 6. As with all the festivals that Etheria describes, there is a great deal of walking to and from different churches in and around Jerusalem, including transit between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, some seven miles to the south. She says this of the Christmas/Epiphany celebration.

Thus, then, is the feast celebrated with all this joyfulness and festal array throughout the eight days in all the holy places which I have mentioned above. And in Bethlehem also throughout the entire eight days the feast is celebrated with similar festal array and joyfulness daily by the priests and by all the clergy there, and by the monks who are appointed in that place. For from the hour when all return by night to Jerusalem with the bishop, the monks of that place keep vigil in the church in Bethlehem, reciting hymns and antiphons. . . . And immense crowds, not of monks only, but also of laity, both men and women, flock together to Jerusalem from every quarter for the solemn and joyous observance of that day.⁷

Etheria is her own version of a fourth-century blogger! The proclaimer will find rich resources among historical resources such as these that can lend historical liveliness to the doctrines and biblical texts appointed to this celebration. Some of the ancient documents and sermons contain unforgettable—and sadly forgotten—images, metaphors, and theological articulations that are worth incorporating into contemporary sermons.

The spread of Christmas to other parts of Europe and around the globe from these earliest points of origin has a diverse and rich history. No attempt is made to rehearse that here. This history can be traced through several types of documents: sacramentaries, lectionaries, official church documents, missionary reports to Rome, sermons, conciliar decisions, theologians' writings, and records of the customs of local celebrations.

Today Christmas in the Northern Hemisphere has been refracted culturally, particularly through various visual and written narratives. Some of these include the still-popular works like Charles Dickens's story "A Christmas Carol" and the World War II film *White Christmas*. Other media events include such civic ceremonies as the lighting of the Christmas tree at the White House and the service of hymns and carols

from Westminster Abbey on December 24. The exchange of greetings via cards is popular worldwide, but one is significantly challenged today to find any cards that directly speak of the birth of Jesus.

Christians celebrating Christmas south of the equator do so against the backdrop of the beginning of springtime. The winter motifs and theological themes such as darkness and isolation that can bear on Christmas proclamation in northern countries are absent in these environments. Both hemispheres, though using different terminology, focus on worship, food, crèche scenes, and gifts. Elizabeth A. Johnson calls to mind a form of Christian theater in Hispanic communities that portrays the coming of the Christ child in a unique fashion.

Posada. This pre-Christmas ritual reenacts the Bethlehem story with emphasis on the search for shelter, there being no room at the inn. . . . This ritual procession [from house to house in a community] makes vividly present the truth that the God of heaven and earth was walking with this poor couple. . . . Those who take part in the procession understand its strong resonance with the migration, homelessness, and rejection all too well known in the community. The celebration that follows affirms that Emmanuel comes to abide among those whom the world rejects, which is cause for joy.⁸

Given the hotly debated global reality of immigrants and immigration, Johnson's description of the *posada* may be a significant illustration for a Christmas sermon, reflecting the inescapable political ramifications of the birth narrative. Lest one forget the perpetual presence of immigrants that this custom reflects so poignantly, most communities in America, whether rural or urban, host many of these very people.

In America, Christmas was and still is significantly tied to the processes of immigration and assimilation. Leigh Eric Schmidt says, "Reflecting the syncretic interplay of countless immigrant customs, the varying versions of the American Christmas are all the more elaborate and complex for this kaleidoscope of cultural traditions."⁹ His observation also implicitly raises the problems of how Christmas might be preached cross-generationally, with differing generations claiming various views about immigration.

The general complexity of Christmas meanings and activities prompts this list from Schmidt's work on the commercialization of Christmas. His compilation of themes is a stunning reminder of just

how many things can have a potential impact on the Christmas preacher's sermon preparation, regardless of the global context: "To see the modern Christmas in the round would include . . . folklore, religion, festival, art, music, literature, television, food, education, civic ceremony [e.g., battles over crèches in the public square], gender, family, gift exchange, ethnicity, localism, race, class, and commerce."¹⁰ Since Christmas traditions, secular and religious, in any given country have yielded massive amounts of information, the preacher seeking specific information may want to focus on those national and global sources that best suit a congregation's context. Internet resources note literally millions of such potential resources!

Of all the festivals, Christmas is the one that has produced the most significant religious and cultural critique. Some of the neuralgic, even horrific, realities that come to the fore at Christmas include Jewish-Christian relations; the role of religion in public life; gross consumerism reflected in the overpriced and costly displays of gifts and events; the season of the Christ child with its oppositional fact of the exploitation and sexual abuse of children; glorification of the so-called nuclear family, which omits other kinds of family configurations; the use of Christmas to sanction civil religion; negative treatment of groups of people such as the poor, the different, and the immigrant. Kathleen Sands describes how the celebration of Christmas has become the art of dodging the realities Scripture seeks to depict by public and intentional mismanagement of personal, public, and corporate history.

For nostalgia is not simply sanitized memory; it is an alternative to memory, a kind of "motivated forgetting." Christmas in our country has always been that. At one level, the nostalgia concerns the story of Jesus, which if remembered would actually be a story of poverty, "illegitimacy," genocide, and political domination. . . . No, the aim of Christmas in the United States is not to recreate the founding event of Jesus' birth. Rather, the aim is to reenact a previous and ideal presumably celebration of Christmas itself—a Christmas "just like the one we used to know."¹¹

Sands's essay holds up for the Christmas pulpit a key question: *Which version of Christmas will one preach?* Perhaps the question might also be stated as: Which combination of versions of Christmas will be proclaimed? Undoubtedly, the cultural and religious weight that Christmas bears makes of this festival a challenging event for the proclaimer.

Christmas Pericopes

Christmas is one festival whose texts range over a two-day period. The lessons appointed are trifold: Christmas Eve, Christmas Dawn, and Christmas Day. Matthew's version of the birth narrative is omitted from any of the three settings, leaving only Luke's recounting and John's radically different vision of the divine entry into the world.

Sermonic decisions on these texts will be determined in part by the length of the sermon; for example, the lateness of the Christmas Eve hour in most places directs this time factor. The bracketed verses provided by the lectionary also mean the preacher's text focus will be determined by how many services the parish has. Should one service be held on Christmas Day, the preacher will use John's Gospel reading, which clearly represents a vastly different Christology of the divine entering the human estate.

Preaching about the birth of a child, an event of promise and hope and joy, raises the issue of how the preacher articulates the meanings of this birth. Without wishing to sound like a homiletical Scrooge, one could note that much preaching at Christmas focuses solely on the birth in all its beauty, glory, and delight and *still* manages to avoid the meanings embedded in it. Such preaching never answers the critical theological question applicable to the birth: So what?

Here Martin Luther's emphasis on humanity as being subject to both the law and the gospel offers a view of the human being, regardless of time and place, which can be thoughtfully proclaimed at Christmas. Theologian Herman Stuempfle says,

They [law and gospel] lie interlaced with each other in the same human heart, for the Christian is always at the same time "sinner and justified." Therefore, we never hear the promise of the Gospel without, insofar as we are still "in the flesh," hearing also the rumbling threats of the Law. Nor do we hear the threats of the Law, without, insofar as we are also "in the Spirit," rejoicing in the promise of forgiveness announced to us in the Gospel.¹²

In the fifth century, Chrysostom raises the same matter before his congregation, asking if their interpretation of the Gospels is actually true to its nature and claims.

And yet ye have often heard that good news ought to have nothing sad in it: yet this "good news" has abundance of sadness in it. . . .

You look downcast; *you* look stunned; you are struck all of a heap, unable to hold up your heads. “Good news” should have nothing in it of a duty to be done, but rather should counsel what is good; whereas these “Gospels” have endless duties to be done.¹³

His words are a challenge to consider how the issues listed in the first section of this chapter might be incorporated into a Christmas sermon, so listeners may hear that this birth actually has significance for a struggling creation. Both Stuempfle and Chrysostom are asking in differing ways, Is Christmas proclamation true to the heart of the gospel?

Christmas Eve/Nativity of Our Lord, Proper I: Luke 2:1-14 [15-20] (Years A, B, C)

Who cannot sympathize with the seminarian who said in class one day, on preparing to preach this text: “How I can preach such a well-known story? How can I speak this so people will really listen?” Perhaps the crammed pews in churches on Christmas Eve in many places attest to the fact that the story carries its own weight so well that people are drawn yearly to hear it again and again. (Because of, or perhaps in spite of, the preacher’s efforts!) In order to avoid mindless repetition of the nativity story minus interpretive nuances, sermon preparation should utilize the immense body of works available on the Lukan birth narrative, this being one of two in the New Testament and the most detailed of the two. Among the many resources, the last two decades have also yielded materials relating Bible to sociology, which the thoughtful proclaimer can peruse.¹⁴

The preacher would do well to address in some manner the major question that lurks behind proclamation of Luke’s narrative: *What is this birth supposed to signify?* Joel Green makes this stunning assertion concerning the first two chapters of Luke, which culminate in the birth of Jesus: “We are thus reminded that Luke 1–2 as a unit is incomplete in itself; it prepares for and, in important ways, requires the rest of Luke-Acts.”¹⁵ This claim means that Christmas proclamation, viewed beyond the Christmas sermon, sets the stage, along with earlier Advent texts, as an introduction to the repeated themes that Luke continues to sound throughout his Gospel for Year C. During Year C of the RCL, then, preaching Christmas can signal the beginning of the specifically Lukan version of God’s biography for the upcoming church year.

The lectionary stipulates the possibility of preaching only up to verse 14, but the story, as an intact rhetorical unity, goes up to verse 20. Preaching all twenty verses offers a more cohesive framework for sermonic reflection. For example, after verse 14, what did the shepherds do with the message they were given? How did that affect them and others? If this text must be divided between services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, the preacher, in the Christmas Eve sermon, might consider signaling that there is more to come!

The birth narrative highlights several major Lukan Gospel themes overall. One is Luke's concern for those who are poor or who have only meager resources. The twenty verses of the birth narrative focus on common people and their realities: Mary and Joseph temporarily displaced by government mandate, shepherds with their animals, inadequate shelter, a child who lacks a bed and has to be put in an animal's food trough. Mention of the ranks and positions of Emperor Augustus and of a Roman governor of Syria at the beginning of the story seem ludicrous in comparison to the story's main human focus. The contrast, intended by Luke, could not be greater.

A second theme Luke reiterates is his understanding of the *universal* span of God's redemptive activity. Luke is not merely recording the story of the birth of a god who will remain only a localized deity. The details of Luke's writing show he has deeply embedded the Jesus story into the everyday events and activities of the known world at that time. Luke is always about daily human history as he seeks to proclaim Jesus the Messiah. No one is too great or too insignificant to be omitted from Luke's understanding of the gospel. This gospel comes to all regardless of their identity, social status, or political involvements. Luke's God is one who lavishly bestows the gift of salvation on all comers.

A third theme has to do with power and the uses of power, particularly manifested by the rulers of the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' time and their use of the title of "Savior." Richard Horsley notes the juxtaposition between the occupying government of the time and the entrance of Jesus onto the world's stage:

It is difficult to imagine or comprehend two such different saviors as Caesar Augustus and Jesus and the dramatically different societies and values they represent. The first stood at the apex of a "worldwide" hierarchical political-economic-religious system in which the prolonged festivals celebrating the savior's birth [Caesar] and the salvation he provided both ritually constituted the

hierarchical imperial power relationship and consolidated the political-economic-religious positions of the power brokers who sponsored the festivals. The newly born Messiah of Israel, laid in a feeding trough, was the very opposite of a symbol of power that determined people's lives. He represented the hopes and aspirations of a subject people to be free from the exploitative imperial system that controlled their lives.¹⁶

Luke, one of the New Testament's more sophisticated Greek writers, seems to dwell on triads in these twenty verses. The story itself is divided into three parts: the birth, the appearance of the angel/s to the shepherds, and the visit of the shepherds to Bethlehem and elsewhere. The angel's announcement results in three separate groups receiving it: first, the shepherds; second, their conveyance of the message to Mary and Joseph; and, finally, what the shepherds told others. Each of these triadic arrangements offers the preacher a potential sermon structure.

In preaching this text, two issues should receive less homiletical attention. Later scholarship indicates some flaws in Luke's dating of events as well as later interpretations of the social status of the shepherds at the time. Both of these points in the text have been stereotyped in sermons and older commentary literature and require a much lighter touch sermonically. That being so, it is wise to avoid making much of the census. (None existed historically at the time Luke claims this took place.) From a literary point of view, mention of a census is perhaps a linguistic device to situate the child's birth in Bethlehem, the place of the kingly Davidic line historically. Similarly, making of the shepherds people who are the poverty-stricken or "lowest of the low" should also be avoided, when, in fact, owning herds of animals signified a form of agrarian wealth.

As with any baby, one question is, What do we call him? One part of this passage provides ample sermonic possibilities, the titles announced in the angel's message to the shepherds, found in verse 11. While his *name* was called "Jesus," Luke also designates three *titles* for the child: Savior, Messiah, and Lord. These titles offer a useful triadic sermonic structural option. Historically, there is some latitude for interpreting these, given the differences in the use of Greek and Hebrew. "Lord" and "Savior" were also used of the Roman rulers of Jesus' time, so there is an ironic juxtaposition that emerges when these are applied to Jesus.

Luke reinforces the Old Testament links to Jesus' birth in his use of the titles. Green notes that "these titles are all set within the interpretive context of Isaiah 9:1-7 and the prior material in Luke 1 pertaining to the throne of David. In drawing on Isaianic images Luke shows the importance of this child in exalted, salvation-historical terms, grounding his interpretation of Jesus firmly in Israel's hope for divine deliverance."¹⁷ Using these titles in a sermon can establish discussion of such topics as Old Testament prophecy in relation to Jesus' birth; God's intentions for Jesus, as indicated by these titles; the content and meaning of Jesus' life and ministry; and the contrast between what saviors and lords then and now do in relationship to who Jesus is and how he functions as Lord and Savior.

This latter topic might well utilize literature on the sociological setting of Jesus' times and our own. Both eras provide ample materials for reflections on globally powerful empires.¹⁸ How Jesus was part of that empire, and also set against it, makes the angel's titles both real and ironic. The titles can also be directed to their eschatological meanings: what starts at Bethlehem does not stay there. It resonates to the end of time, to yield the final revelation of the Savior, Lord, and Messiah of the nations.

The pressures of holiday preaching impose themselves on the preacher. The church is often filled with strangers and visitors. How should one preach on holy matters to those who are not only the "regulars" but also visitors, infrequent worshipers? The very simplicity of Luke's version of the birth should not be weighed down by a complex sermon; the fact that people yearly come to hear the birth story testifies to its simple and powerful validity. Elaborate sermon structures or homiletical gimmicks using contemporary pop-culture symbols and other sentimental versions of Jesus' birth are best avoided. The choice of a simple doctrinal entry into this story will allow Luke's text to speak for itself.

Christmas Dawn/Nativity of Our Lord, Proper II: Luke 2:[1-7] 8-20 (Years A, B, C)

This text is the same as that appointed for Christmas Eve *except* that the brackets indicate a potentially different starting point. While I prefer preaching a text in its entirety for rhetorical and logical reasons, if the preacher chooses to address this same text—again—at the first of the

two Christmas Day services, choices about verses used on Christmas Eve will obviously be affected.

For Christmas Dawn usage, the brackets indicate the focus has moved from the birth to heavenly, public, and familial responses to it. Already the birth scene is receding into the past, but the meanings of it have yet to be worked out. One possible sermonic theme that seems to permeate everything from verse 8 on is messages given and messages received: the angel speaks to the shepherds; hosts of angels bring the message of God's peace; the family and "all who heard it" (2:18; the shepherds' words) marvel at the message they have heard.

It is interesting that only the content of the sole angel's message and the words of the heavenly hosts are recorded in this text. What the shepherds, family, and friends thought about the words relayed to them is not recorded. This silence in the text leaves imaginative space for a sermon on how different people received the angels' words and might be in keeping with the preacher's desire to challenge the listeners as to how they are receiving the word of the child's birth today.

Verse 18 says that "all who heard it [the news] were amazed at what the shepherds told them." One direction a Christmas Day sermon might take is in the form of a speech or dialogue from the shepherds about what they heard and saw. What did they say about the angel's appearance, the additional appearance of more angels, the trip to Bethlehem, what they saw there, and, finally, what they thought important to relay to others about their experiences?

Christmas Day/Nativity of Our Lord, Proper III: John 1:1-14 (Years A, B, C)

The pericope ends at verse 14, as designated by the RCL. For a fuller rhetorical understanding, however, the discussion below is extended to the end of verse 18, the verse set that most commentaries address. This passage offers a significant challenge to any preacher who chooses to reflect on the nativity from a Gospel text that makes no reference to the Bethlehem episode specifically.

Volumes have been written on the so-called prologue to John's Gospel, of which this pericope is part. John's theology, so different in direction and design from the Synoptic Gospels, is couched in both Greek philosophical and theological terms. The simplicity of John's Greek belies the enormous amount of interpretative and homiletical possibilities this passage offers.

Before deciding on any homiletical strategies for this text, some linguistic investigation is necessary. In Robert Kysar's major work on preaching John's Gospel,¹⁹ he advises the preacher to spend time exploring the linguistic relationships between "word" and "Word" (or *logos* in the Greek) as a necessary element in proclaiming this prologue. The use of "Word" in the prologue is significant; it is used four times in these eighteen verses. The first is to establish its origin; the second to place it in relationship to God; the third to assert, paradoxically, that it *is* God; and the fourth usage is to claim that the Word was made human flesh. "Word" is also used implicitly to describe God's acts of creation, the testimony of John (vv. 6-9, 15); the arrival of Jesus (vv. 10-14) and the affirmation of Jesus, beginning with words of the law. In the final verse, "Word" is understood both as speech and the person of Jesus. "Word" speaks the hidden heart of God.

The fundamental role of the word in relationship with God [in John 1] is enacted in Jesus' words, so that through his words one has access to the Word, which is access to God. *The Word is incarnated in words.* The revelation of God in Christ is a linguistic revelation insofar as Christ is God's own Word and Christ's words are part of the revelation of the Word. It is clear in this case, however, that the category of "word" is expanded to include act and even person. That Word that is Jesus comes to public view in what he does and who he is as well as in what he says.²⁰

John's Gospel starts with the same words as Genesis: "In the beginning . . ." There is nothing hidden, subtle, or unspoken in John's words about the divinity of Jesus. He asserts the prehuman existence of *Jesus as God* to the extent that the use of pronouns in the passage can be confusing. Is John speaking of God, of Jesus the Christ, or both?

John's starting point is not the manger but eternity. He includes a form of human history in this passage, but time and space in human terms are less important than the fact of God's Son, described against the backdrop of the created order and eternity. "God the only Son" and "Jesus Christ" are the only two titles mentioned in this passage, and they come near the end of it (vv. 17, 18).

This text gives the Christmas festival celebration a sermonic "adult" look. Absent is any birth narrative and everything that goes with it (which may come as a relief to many listeners). The earthly focus on Jesus in Luke's narrative is reframed in John into the "Christ of faith"

perspective. John's passage is a summary of everything for which the completed Jesus story stands. John's text is a reminder, too, of how summaries of God's biography make cameo appearances in different festivals in their own particular and subtle ways.

In proclaiming this text, pointing out John's theological starting point can be helpful to listeners. John argues from the end to the beginning, so to speak, or, in theological parlance, proleptically.²¹ In other words, what John is about theologically and doctrinally in this passage is "high Christology," a view of Jesus which is postresurrection and glorified and read back into the Jesus of history. The nativity in any historical sense has receded into the distant past. The results, effects, and meanings of the Christmas story are cast across an eternal horizon.

In proclaiming this text, however, John's eternal perspective does not cancel out the very contemporary sense of the "not yet" of God's final victory. Herman Stuempfle's previous words on law and gospel definitely have a bearing on this particular passage. This is evidenced in the passage, in part, through the multiple uses of the negative. These establish gaps between what has happened and what has not: "without him not one thing came into being"; "the darkness did not overcome it"; "he himself was not the light"; "the world knew him not"; "his own people did not accept him"; "born, not of blood . . . will of the flesh . . . will of man"; "No one has ever seen God."

Stated in a slightly different way, John's contrastive method is another way of preaching the major themes of this text. Oppositional categories include God and world; John and Jesus; those who recognize Jesus and those who do not; darkness and light; law and grace; seen God (Jesus) and unseen God; light and darkness; humanity's acceptance or non-acceptance of Jesus; and a new way of life compared to the usual forms of life humanity has known.

This pericope also contains several verses that can be preached alone: one such example is verse 14. There is so much included in this densely written verse that it can provide more than enough sermonic material. The greatest assertion made in this verse—the one most shocking, really—is that "the Word became flesh." Of all assertions of the Christian faith, it is this one that has provoked the most disbelief, argument, and skepticism over the millennia.

Furthermore, this incarnated God did not come secretly or live in kingly splendor aloof from the general run of human life, "[he] lived among us." This raises the possibilities of humanity not recognizing

the divine's choice of life among people. It also places God in the position of being the most subtle, if not stealthy, of all gods: one variation on this theme of hiddenness is the notion prevalent in the patristic era that God purposely chose incarnation as a human being to fool Satan! Patristic writers sometimes wrote of Jesus' birth as a ploy to trick the forces of evil that would supposedly *never* look for God as a baby. The same is true in a related image, which views the cross as a divinely baited mousetrap, with Jesus' body as the bait (as at Bethlehem), guaranteed to trap Satan, who is clueless about God's Son being crucified!

These ideas and images capture what constitutes one of the major scandals of the Christian faith, that God became a human being. Christianity is the only religion that believes this. People literally are still dying today as martyrs for asserting this. It is the ultimate call and test of faith to believe this. This can, indeed, be a sermonic question: *Do we believe it?* Preachers can also ponder the possibility that today the theological emphasis on the immanence of God in human affairs is so widespread that its influence might have dulled the shock of what it means for divinity to become human.

Verse 14 also uses the word *glory*. It would seem in this qualifying, following phrase that glory has everything to do with how Jesus looks like God; in fact, God is like a son who bears the image of a father. Glory seems to be reflective in nature in that sense, but it is also more than that: if we see Jesus, we see God. This glory is constituted of two things: "grace" and "truth." Jesus, as incarnated, represents the plenitude of God in both respects. Both historically and theologically, this verse proclaims the Jesus of history as sharing in the very nature of God and displaying two of God's attributes—grace and truth.

Verse 14 also offers material for preaching on the ways God's coming in Jesus unites us with God. The homiletical implication that can be drawn out from this verse—one that is explored at greater length later in this book—is, namely, the *deification of humanity in Christ*. Simply stated, this means that if Jesus is God and Jesus became human, then human flesh has been divinely blessed, even incorporated into God. The incarnation draws humanity into active participation in God. For example, one common metaphor describes the incarnation as a "bridge." In the person of Jesus the Christ, humanity has been caught up into God's life, something that we partially enjoy now through baptism and participation in the life of the church and the world for Christ's sake.

One blogger, David Downing, describes another lively metaphor of the incarnation taken from C. S. Lewis:

Lewis said he could not conceive how “eternal self-existent Spirit” could be combined with “a natural human organism” so as to make one person. He added, though, that every human embodies the same enigma to a lesser degree, an immortal spirit inhabiting a mortal body (*Miracles*, chap. 14).

In one of his most extended comparisons, Lewis compares Christ to a pearl-diver, a passage so elaborate that it borders on allegory:

“One may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanishing rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks the surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too” (*Miracles*, chap. 14).²²

As one preaches this passage of the preexistent Jesus Christ, any sermon on these verses will hopefully portray the same wonder and the same question: How can this be?

Doctrinal Proclamation

The scriptural descriptions surrounding Jesus’ birth have resulted in a rich tapestry of related teachings about the multiple meanings of this event. The birth of Jesus is generally summed up doctrinally by its most major theme, the incarnation. The definition of *incarnation* refers to an entity, usually divine, who takes on flesh and enters the world of humanity. *Incarnation* is a common term used in many religions as a means of considering how the divine and the human might join company in one entity.

As is true with all festivals, this one has produced a number of derivative doctrines as well. Some are more central to the fact of the incarnation itself, while others are secondary. These topics offer preaching potential: the nature of God; the two natures of Christ; the doctrine of self-emptying or, in Greek, *kenōsis*; the doctrine of the Word; atonement

and redemption; the doctrine of creation; sin and evil; and sacramental doctrine. All of these doctrines have been developed and interpreted in various ways over the church's history. Depending on the times and people, some have maintained greater prominence than others. Some of the ancient doctrines have also been rendered unexpectedly new and provocative in their expressions in today's global theological arena.

Sermonic expressions of the Christmas doctrinal cluster are quoted in this section. As with successive festival discussions, these are variously described through theologians' reflections, illustrative sermonic quotations, or both. Suggestions are offered for homiletical strategies that might deepen the understanding and meanings of the basic scriptural narratives. By no means is this list of doctrinal approaches exhaustive, although the literature on these topics definitely is! The intent in offering these perspectives is to foster a wide array of preaching strategies that can build a bridge between the biblical text and doctrinal theological reflection on it.

Since doctrinal understandings concerning the incarnation are nuanced and often mandated by denominational perspectives, one of the homilist's tasks will necessarily involve attention to confessional materials that most effectively engage her or his own preaching tradition. The Bible, major church council decisions, and theologians of succeeding generations have struggled with articulating the aspects of the incarnation. Contemporary theologian Kathryn Tanner describes its purpose and function in this way.

The incarnation is for the purpose of humanity's entrance into trinitarian relations. . . . Incarnation is for the sake of human redemption, in other words. The ultimate point of the incarnation is not to give the Word a human shape but to bring about an altered manner of human existence, one realizing on a human plane the very mode of existence of the second person of the trinity. . . . Humanity is to take on the very manner of existence of the Word as that is displayed in the Word's relations with the other members of the trinity.²³

As far as connecting the incarnation with other elements of Christian theology, Tanner's definition is noteworthy in terms of her reference to it via the Trinity: this is one example of the interlocking network of doctrines that relate the six principal festivals to one another. Each festival's doctrines build on the events and theology of the previous festival

(chronologically understood) but might also reach ahead to prefigure upcoming festivals. Preachers, such as Chrysostom and Augustine, who are fond of doctrinal lists, will often recapitulate all the festivals' major doctrines in a given sermon on one particular festival. This is a classical rhetorical technique, called *enumeratio*, that attempts to provide additional evidence and add emphasis.²⁴

The marvel of God's entry into humanity's world is poetically expressed in this excerpt from one of Augustine's sermons. His assertions function in a paradoxical fashion. Augustine also recapitulates the upcoming christological results of the incarnation and uses these as a call to live out mature Christianity.

The one who regulates the stars is sucking his mother's breasts; he fills the angels, speaks in the Father's bosom, and is silent in his mother's. But he is going to speak when he reaches the right age, and to fill up the gospel for us. Going to suffer for our sakes, going to die for our sakes, going to rise again as the model for our reward, going to ascend into heaven before the eyes of the disciples, going to come from heaven in judgment. There you have the one who was lying in a manger; he made himself small, but didn't lose himself; he took on what he was not, but remained what he was. There you are, we have Christ as an infant; let us grow up with him.²⁵

An adjacent corollary to the doctrine of the incarnation relates to the topic of God's self-emptying in order to enter into humanity's realm, *kenosis*. This term has a rich history in the life of the faith and can mean two things: a term for the incarnation itself or the act of the Christ laying aside his divine attributes in order to become human. Another image connected with *kenosis* is that of the suffering servant, derived from passages in the book of Isaiah. The scriptural locus for this is found in Philippians 2:5-11. Ironically, any sermon discussion of this self-giving dynamic of "emptying" flies directly in the face of the cultural "filling and stuffing" of the Christmas season.

Kenosis also raises the issue of how the divine and human natures of Jesus are understood psychologically, historically, theologically, and spiritually. Humanity seems generally more comfortable with the divine staying transcendent as opposed to an enfleshed and ever-present God. When filmmakers produced *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on Nikos Kazantzakis's novel of the same title,²⁶ there was considerable

uproar over what was perceived as the far-too-human depiction of Jesus. The consternation is understandable, however, when confronted with the event of the incarnation and is a significant challenge for serious Christmas proclamation.

Reference to *kenosis* is found in a sermon given by the Eastern church father Gregory Nazianzen either on Christmas 380 or on January 6, 318. (This sermon also conflates reflections on the Nativity and Epiphany.)

And He Who gives riches becomes poor, for He assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the richness of His Godhead. He that is full empties himself, for He empties Himself of His glory for a short while, that I may have a share in His Fullness. What are the riches of His Goodness? What is this mystery that is around me? I had a share in the image; I did not keep it; He partakes of my flesh that He may both save the image and make the flesh immortal.²⁷

Sacramental doctrine, particularly in terms of Baptism and the Eucharist, are expressed differently in all major traditions. They offer excellent secondary sources of ecclesial thinking for Christmas proclamation, especially if the Eucharist is celebrated as a part of a Christmas service. A reference to Baptism can be found in one of the earlier and pastorally superb preaching popes, Leo the Great. In a Christmas homily he says,

Yet today's festival renews for us the holy childhood of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary: and in adoring the birth of our Saviour, we find we are celebrating the commencement of our own life. For the birth of Christ is the source of life for Christian folk, and the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the body. Although every individual that is called has his own order, and all the sons of the Church are separated from one another by intervals of time, yet as the entire body of the faithful being born in the font of baptism . . . so with Him are they born in this nativity.²⁸

A sermon effectively linking the body of Christ offered at the Eucharist with the body of the child born at Bethlehem is described by Peter Gomes.

So we join with him and with one another in this feast of feasts on this day of days, for the gift of the Incarnation continues in

the fellowship that we have with Christ around His Holy Table. In these most ordinary, these most tangible creatures of bread and wine, flesh and blood, we become at one with him who for us became one of us. Every time a baby is born, the old legend says, God endorses his world; and every time we celebrate the Holy Communion we experience once again his Incarnation.²⁹

One of the major theological relationships that the incarnation establishes is its connection with doctrines of the atonement. This doctrinal category will develop in time from the significance of the Easter event in particular. The incarnation, however, lays the foundation for initiating conversations about what it means to be saved. The juxtaposition of a tiny baby as a sign of the divine commitment to redeem the cosmos is worthy of emphasis in a Christmas sermon. It is not merely that God, in Jesus' natal entry into the world, blesses and calls humanity to engage in God's life. This also means humanity is saved from the destructive distortions of sin and evil and ultimately eternal death.

Charles Albert Tindley (c. 1851–1933), an African American preacher in Philadelphia, served Calvary Methodist Church, which was later renamed in his honor. In his 1913 sermon on Christmas, he uses the metaphor of the Christmas tree and the tree of life to describe the gifts God gives at Christmas. In his proclamation he points directly to the fact of the atonement.

I point to another package on another limb higher up. It is marked Forgiveness for the Guilty. It shines with the brightness of the Redeemer's face and is stained with the blood of Calvary. It is set in a frame carved out of the love of God and is dazzling with a chandelier of a thousand promises, whose jets flow with the breath of the Man of Sorrow and many stripes. It is the most costly package on this tree. Those fingerprints you see on it were left there by the nail-pierced hand of the Man of Galilee. He tied it there in the darkness and earthquakes of that Friday afternoon when the dead woke up before the morning of the resurrection and the rocks broke their silence.³⁰

As Tindley's sermon so well expresses, the preacher will inevitably be faced with the corollary doctrines of sin and evil in speaking of the atonement as part of the incarnation's meanings. Contemporary preachers often shy away from speaking specifically about these topics. Failure to address them, however, involves a theologically truncated view of the

gift of the incarnation. Herman Stuempfle used to speak of the gospel as providing a type of antiphon, or response, to the world's realities. By that he meant the gospel is drained of its significance if preaching the birth of Jesus as the core of the gospel omits addressing the questions of *why* this birth is important and to what and for whom it is addressed.³¹

Martin Luther, in a sixteenth-century Christmas sermon, describes how the forces of evil continue to wage war against the fact of the incarnation. In a sermonic reflection on the pervasiveness of evil, he references the Qur'an to describe the cosmic reactions of evil against the birth of Jesus. Luther's comments below are fascinating for exhibiting his willingness to draw on a non-Christian sacred text to support his arguments.

And in the Koran, Mohammed—or whoever the author may be—confesses that the devil fell because he refused to adore Adam. The devil makes his confession through Mohammed. God commanded him to adore Adam, that is [the devil] confesses that he had seen that God was to become man and that he would have to worship Him, etc. (The devil is so bitter that he cannot keep quiet). . . . But the devil saw what would come to pass in the mirror of the Holy Trinity. He still seeks to hinder it, just as he did then, and for this reason he was cast down [from heaven.]³²

Proclaiming the incarnation with integrity ultimately brings the preacher to the confluence of the gospel and culture. At these crossroads the sensitive preacher will discern both the positive and darker sides of human response *and resistance* to this (and all) festivals. Chief among these negative responses is a form of cultural apathy among many Christians who may well relinquish Christian perspectives in favor of a more secular Christmas celebration. The commercialization of Christmas is not new news: it has been going on for centuries. Oddly enough, the very fact that the Magi brought gifts to the new child has already set the stage for the association of gift giving at Christmas. Nevertheless, the delicate balance between enjoying the material aspects of the festival and focusing on its meaning can be upset. Alternatives to traditional Christmas celebrations are available. It is a homiletical decision as to what extent the preacher will urge these on listeners. Leigh Eric Schmidt, in his book *Consumer Rites*, describes this option:

Among the most salient examples of the continued critique of the modern Christmas has been the ecumenical group Alternatives,

which was organized . . . in 1973 explicitly for the purpose of protesting “the commercialization of Christmas.” . . . With support from several Catholic dioceses and mainline Protestant bodies, the association annually publishes a sophisticated critique of America’s “Santa Claus theology” entitled *Whose Birthday Is It Anyway?* for use in the churches.³³

Gomes also offers a way to consider the balance between faith and culture at the festival of Christmas.

Christmas lends itself so easily to metaphor and sentiment. We need our metaphors, and sentiment is the grease without which our human machinery would break down and wear out, but Christmas does not represent a sentiment, an idea, or even a feeling about God. Christmas belongs to those who recognize not the sense of the holidays but the real presence of God in their lives and in their world, not simply once upon a time long ago and far away but here and now, in inhabiting our hearts and struggling with us against the tangible realities that surround us.³⁴

As with all the festivals, Christmas presents an opportunity to share the gospel with those who are unaware of its invitation or resistant to its message. Because of the material and obviously public expressions of Christmas, the festival has become a *public* battleground against the expression of the gospel. Evidences of this can be found in the numerous lawsuits focused on the display of Christmas symbols in public, particularly the crèche scenes.

In their collection of essays, *Christmas Unwrapped*, Richard Horsley and James Tracy point out the predicament that Christians face in offering these symbols of the Christian faith publicly. In an essay citing a lawsuit over the display of a crèche scene, Paula Cooey describes the theological issues at stake.

Yet, *Lynch v. Donnelly* illuminates just how impossible it is to imagine a spiritual realm totally without reference to a material order. Likewise, a secular order, where “secular” is understood as a realm in which the life of the spirit is absent, a religion-free zone if you will, simply does not exist. To construe the world in such a manner results in self-deception, both individual and collective. Christian teaching has historically taken its Hebrew heritage seriously, as one in which God engages humans within history, and

has claimed that God has further entered human history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as Christ.³⁵

In a delightful Christmas Eve sermon, Pastor Stephen Herr uses the crèche scene for his focus. He describes how, with the “help” of his young children, the family assembles the crèche yearly. He asserts what this well-known visual image reflects back to all of us concerning our faith.

But no matter how many shepherds, or how many magi, or how many camels or sheep or cows or even angels you have in your Nativity scene I am going to surmise that everyone only has one Joseph and one Mary and one baby Jesus.

And I am also willing to bet that in every scene Joseph and Mary and Baby Jesus are inside the stable, and they are not off in the back corner of the stable, but in the middle of the stable.

In fact, I bet Mary and Joseph are just to the left and right of center, on either side of Baby Jesus, who undoubtedly occupies dead center. The point that all the other characters, even the animals, are directing their attention to, and place where we are invited to place our attention.

The central place of the manger and the Christ Child in nativity scenes is the primary focus of this season.

Jesus Christ the Son of God

The Word of God incarnate

The second person of the Holy and most blessed trinity

The one who will be crucified and resurrected

Is at the center of our lives and this Savior born unto us embodies God coming into the center of our lives

Drawing our attention.

Drawing our adoration, and our assent to God’s plan for our lives.

Jesus is at the center and draws our attention and focus toward him and thus towards God.³⁶

Undoubtedly, proclaiming the Christmas festival offers multifaceted challenges for the preacher because of both theological and cultural pressures to interpret this festival meaningfully. Elements that invite reflection include the biblical text, the context of the congregation, the life of the surrounding community, and the culture of commercialism that is always present. The preacher must decide how to bridge the biblical text to its doctrinal expressions amid these factors.