

# God Is NowHERE MAN

Sermon, December 18, 2016

Texts: Micah 5:2-5; Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

You may have suspected there are a few typos in the sermon title, and you are correct. The typos are significant. Left as is, the sermon title may call to mind (*at least for those of my generation*) a top-of-the-charts Beatles song from 1966 written by John Lennon. Just a little trivia fact: "Nowhere Man" was the first Beatles song to be entirely unrelated to romance or love or boy-girl interactions; it marked a notable shift to a more philosophical bent of John Lennon in his songwriting. Lennon said in a 1980 interview he wrote the song by himself and about himself; he had been up all night trying to write and the words came to him in a rush just before dawn. Fellow Beatle Paul McCartney said of the song: "*That was John after a night out, with dawn coming up. I think at that point, he was a bit ... wondering where he was going, and to be truthful so was I.*" Which, by the way, is a poignant and even amazing observation about these two young men who seemingly had it all while in their early twenties ... they were wildly successful, immensely wealthy, and enjoyed worldwide recognition but apparently lacked a sense of purpose, identity and life ambition. So, John Lennon wrote what were, by his own account, these autobiographical lyrics (excerpts):

He's a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody.  
Doesn't have a point of view, knows not where he's going to; isn't he a bit like you and me?  
He's as blind as he can be; just sees what he wants to see. Nowhere man, can you see me at all?  
Nowhere man, don't worry. Take your time, don't hurry. Leave it all 'til somebody else lends you a hand.

By the way, this is the same songwriter who wrote the lyrics to "Imagine" (*this solo single of Lennon's has been described as an "atheist anthem" ... in another song Lennon stated he didn't believe "in magic, I Ching, the Bible, tarot, Jesus, Buddha, mantra, Gita and yoga."*)<sup>1</sup> An excerpt: "*Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky ...*" So, to make a bit of a warranted stretch, I think if John Lennon was our church secretary, he might have added a comma to the title so that it would read: "God is nowhere, man."

Now, I would partially agree with his editing. "*Yes, Mr. Nowhere Man, you are correct, there should be a comma! But that is not the only typo. There is one more. This typo, when corrected, might take you SOMEWHERE. This typo, when corrected, might change your whole outlook and perspective on life.*" Yes, this typo, when corrected, might convey a message of hope and purpose, rather than a message of purposelessness, despair and meaninglessness. The typo, when corrected, can turn cynicism into joy, it can bring stability out of chaos, it can bring meaning to an otherwise pointless existence AND it can bring light into our darkness. By the way, don't blame church office administrator Mrs. Castergine ... this "typo" is my fault; it was intentional. Let's add the correction. Let's place a space between the "w" and the "h" and include the comma. That gives us the corrected title and message: "GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN!"

GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN! That's the message of the angel to Joseph! This is what Christmas is about. "Emmanuel, God is with us." He is now here. Light enters darkness, not because we have struck a match, or because of anything else we have done. No, Light has invaded from beyond. It is a most special kind of light. It is not a finite source of light like the flickering candles the acolytes will snuff out when the service is over. This is Light from the eternal source of Light, the light of a child born of God; light which cannot be extinguished.

GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN! This season we celebrate that the One from beyond time and space, the One Who is before anything was, the One who brought all things into being, the One who sustains all things still, the One beyond, behind, and above all reality has now become *tangent* with that reality. He has become a part of His created reality. God has entered the confining envelope of time and space in this intersection of eternity and mortality called the Incarnation; it is the Creator in creation, the Artist becoming a living part of His picture. In the wonderful words of Charles Wesley: "*Veiled in flesh, the God-head see. Hail the incarnate Deity.*" (*By the way, there's the real typo in today's bulletin, and this is my fault ... I spelled "diety" instead of "deity" in the Affirmation of Faith; perhaps because I having dieting on my mind!*) Technically, He's not just "veiled" in flesh, as though He was wearing a costume, but He became truly human. All of the immensity of God that can be absorbed in humanity has become visible to us ... in a baby.

On a related note, I well remember a woman telling me her story of coming to a vital Christian faith while in her mid twenties ... she vividly recounted for me how, months later, she was in church singing the Christmas carols during worship and experiencing something of a personal epiphany as she began to fully realize for the first time the weight and meaning and immense import of the lyrics of these familiar carols. She had sung them many times before, but never with any sense of full appreciation of the glorious message of the lyrics and the miraculous nature of what was being communicated and celebrated. With eyes flashing and a voice full of intense emotion she said, "*I stood there with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat as I realized the depth of what I was singing as these lyrics just leapt off the page: 'Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see! Hail the incarnate Deity! Pleased as man with man to dwell ... Jesus, our Emmanuel!'*"

<sup>1</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_views\\_of\\_the\\_Beatles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_views_of_the_Beatles)

By the way, that woman was my wife.

This can never be minimized ... God has been born into this world! We celebrate the story of Christ's birth, the proclamation of the Incarnation of God in human form, the great good news of the arrival of the One who is Emmanuel, God with us. It really is a mystery so immense we really can't get our minds around it. We read the story, we act it out in Christmas pageants (*as our Sunday School will do this afternoon at 3 pm; hope you can make it!*), we sing songs about it, we write poetry, but words seem insufficient to express the immensity of such a mystery.

### **"IMMENSITY CLOISTERED IN THY DEAR WOMB"**

Poet John Donne (1572-1631) is perhaps best remembered for his lines:

No man is an island, entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,  
as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thine own  
or of thine friend's were. Each man's death diminishes me,  
for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know  
for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. — *Meditation XVII*

John Donne's "La Corona" ("The Crown") is a cycle of seven sonnets of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, two of which are copied below:

#### 2. ANNUNCIATION

Salvation to all that will is nigh ;  
That All, which always is all everywhere,  
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,  
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,  
Lo! faithful Virgin, yields Himself to lie  
In prison, in thy womb; and though He there  
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He'll wear,  
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.  
Ere by the spheres time was created thou  
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son, and Brother ;  
Whom thou conceivest, conceived; yea, thou art now  
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother,  
Thou hast light in dark, and shutt'st in little room  
Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb.

#### 3. NATIVITY

Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb,  
Now leaves His well-beloved imprisonment.  
There he hath made himself to his intent  
Weak enough, now into our world to come.  
But O! for thee, for Him, hath th' inn no room ?  
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from th' orient,  
Stars, and wise men will travel to prevent  
The effects of Herod's jealous general doom.  
See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eye, how He  
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie ?  
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,  
That would have need to be pitied by thee ?  
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,  
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

Anglican theologian and poet John Donne wrote a cycle of seven sonnets about the life of Christ, two of which are in the bulletin insert this morning, one entitled "Annunciation" and the other "Nativity." We won't read these at this time; I invite you to read these sonnets on your own in the days to come ... I just want to focus on a few lines and words in the time we have left this morning, I absolutely love the line linking these two sonnets – **"Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb."** What stands at the heart of this season is the mysterious claim that the immensity of God ... the One who, as Donne puts it, "...fills all place, yet none holds him" ... chose to fully enter into human history, into the material world, into the "stuff" of our physical beings through the womb of a young mother. As Donne so inimitably expresses it, in the miracle of the Incarnation Mary had the unique, remarkable and ultimately inexpressible experience of being her son's sister, her Maker's maker, her Father's mother. *"Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity, pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel."*

In Jesus Christ, God put aside His divine prerogatives to become one of us. The One who called Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life came to show us the Way to live, the Truth of what really is, and to give us Life that is abundant, full and eternal. That is what we celebrate this holy season. Next Sunday we will celebrate God entering human history ... not amid trumpet fanfare or the pageantry of royal courts, no news conferences, no blonde Fox news reporters, no photo-ops, no front office people to put a spin on the events ... no, the immensity of God simply "slips in" unnoticed. Well, not *quite* unnoticed; He couldn't help but let a few others in on it with angelic choirs and miraculous stars ... but He slips in as a child born to young parents on the road, miles away from home ... the birth coming, like all births, on its own inconvenient, yet demanding schedule. He is born not in a palace,

but in humble accommodations, and placed in a manger for a bed ... an animals' feeding trough filled with straw.

It's important to note God did not come in anger, filled with wrath, lusting for punishment or vengeance. God came in goodness and loving kindness, filled with a lust of a different kind ... the lust to give us life. He came not as a judge wagging a finger; He came as a child just inviting us to embrace Him and hold Him close to our hearts. God has come to us as one of us, so that in this child, you and I might become one with God, in and through Him. Forever after, now, we shall know of our acceptability, because God took on human flesh. Forever after, now, we know we are the object of One who eagerly seeks to give what most of us (*including pop musicians*) spend our entire days searching after: life, peace, purpose, meaning, joy and hope. That's why all the singing, all the rejoicing. God came into a world thought to be godforsaken, and GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN ... to make clear we are forsaken no more.

GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN. He came to fill our emptiness, to make new our times of failure. He came to experience our pain, in order to heal it. God took on our frailty and weakness, became open to hurt, disappointment, and failure, even loss; in the incarnation God experienced it all. Before it was over, God would know what it means to be human in every dimension, from its extraordinary joys and laughter, to the depth of abandonment, suffering and death. And when this cradle led to the cross, the darkness finally gathered about Him with greatest force, set to extinguish His light altogether. When that happened, God invaded our reality anew, to do a wonderful new thing ... the light that first invaded on this night long ago at that time invaded once again to drive out despair, transforming grave to resurrection, the despair of death to the hope of eternal life.

In the midst of our longing and need for purpose, in the shame of our failures and the shadows of our darkness, in the midst of times when God seems no where, the message this season is **GOD IS NOW HERE, MAN.**

God is nowhere, man? No. God is now here, man. And that's cause for celebration. Amen.