

December 2009 The Incarnation

"Protect the ball." That was my comment to Rebekah as we debriefed from the basketball game earlier in the evening. What do those words mean? They mean that when you are dribbling you need to dribble and maneuver your body in such a way that the other team can't steal it from you. But how do you do this? You protect the ball by 1) dribbling low instead of high 2) bending your knees instead standing straight up, 3) using your gluteus maximus to ward off defenders. Those are the instructions for "protecting the ball."

These instructions are helpful, but they are no substitute for a physical demonstration with a real live person. So right went to the driveway and practiced dribbling the ball in a way that maximized protection. I dribbled and let her try to steal it while I dribbled low, bent my knees and used my body to keep her away from the ball. Then I let her try it. She improved and is on her way to becoming a very effective ball handler.

Christmas is about God coming down to earth to demonstrate how we should live. For many years his children had been guided by written instructions. The Law of Moses, epitomized by the 10 Commandments, was a divinely inspired record of do's and don'ts. The law taught that we should love our neighbor as ourselves and love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. The law instructed us to keep the Sabbath holy by avoiding unnecessary work on that day. Those were the written instructions.

But it took God becoming man to demonstrate what it means to love our neighbor. Jesus did this by stopping to help the woman with a bleeding issue when he was on his way to an important speaking engagement. He allowed children to climb on his lap while he blessed them through prayer. He forgave a close friend who denied knowing him when powerful people were threatening to take him to prison. Most importantly, he absorbed cruel and unjustified punishment in order to spare us from unspeakable pain and isolation. This is how Jesus incarnated the love of God. Everyone knew they were supposed to love God and neighbor before Jesus arrived. None of that was new. It was all written in the book. What was new was the incarnation, the real live demonstration of human love offered by God in real time.

John begins his epistle (not Gospel) with the words, "*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life*" (1 John 1:1). God had always been the giver and creator of life. God had spoken the world into being and his breath had made Adam a living being. His word never came back void. His word was life. His word gave life.

But in a barn in Bethlehem, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. We would no longer be limited to reading the instruction manual or even watching a teaching video. We could watch God love, heal, forgive, even while he watched him sleep, eat, and talk. This is the profound mystery and gift of God at Christmas. God did more than tell us to "protect the ball." He showed us how to "protect the ball." And if we do what he teaches, we'll make it all the way to the basket and score the winning goal.