**“Christmas ABCs - Leaving Heavenly Mansions, He Came to Our House”**

December 4, 2022 Text: Philippians 2

 Reed Baer West Parish of Barnstable

 Introduction to Scripture

 Our reading for today comes from Paul the Apostle’s Letter to the Philippians. As you may recall, what we know of Paul’s theology comes not from a gospel – he did not write one, and indeed the first gospel was written down years after his death – but from his letters, letters he wrote to churches he had founded. In the section of his letter to the church in Philippi you are about to hear, he quotes a hymn that would have been familiar to be readers.

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 The famer and his family were preparing to head out to the Christmas day worship service in a blinding snow storm. The snow had been piling up in large drifts all night long, and was very deep.

 As the family dressed for church, the farmer pushed his way out to the barn to check on the animals. He was surprised to see a couple birds fluttering around the big door to the barn. It was a strange time of year to see birds in those parts, and the farmer figured maybe they had been blown off course by a storm and ended up at his farm. He knew what to do, and so pushed open the barn doors and began to try to coax the birds to come to safety.

 But when he pushed the barn door open, the birds were afraid and flew off to sit on the fence and watch from a distance. He stood just inside the door, making bird call-like noises, trying to coax those poor cold birds to come to him, but of course they could not understand that and so kept away.

 But then he had an idea. He grabbed some of the grain from a feedbox and threw it out towards the fence, hoping to get their attention. Then he sprinkled some on the snow between the fence and the barn, hoping they would see it and kernel by kernel eat it and so make their way to towards the shelter of the barn.

 It failed. The birds, although clearly freezing in the cold, did not seek the warmth of the barn, fearing the farmer.

 And then he had another, even better thought – what if he could become one of them; what if he had feathers and wings and could talk just like them, then surely they would respond and come to the safety of the barn….

 And then, across the miles of snowy fields, the church bells of Christmas began to ring, calling everyone to worship, calling to them to hear about a God who so loved the world that God came to us, as one of us.

 The parable of the birds and the farmer is, of course, about the meaning of Christmas, about what we call the Incarnation. Because this is the wild, crazy, you just can’t make this kind of stuff up meaning of Christmas – that on that first Christmas, God put off all that majesty and distance and power and came to our house, to us, as a tiny, vulnerable baby, taking on our lot, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

 This is what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Philippians. That in Jesus Christ, God decided that the time had come to leave the celestial mansions of glory and comfort, put off all that majesty and untouchable power, and taking on the form of a lowly human, came to our house. Moved right in.

God loved us so much that God left the mansions of Paradise to take up residence in a stable in dirt poor little old town of Bethlehem, born to a teenage girl and her carpenter husband in a conquered country ruled by a foreign invader.

It is as if God was singing that classic holiday song two thousand years early, singing “*I’ll be Home for Christmas*”, and the home God is talking about is a muddy stable in the Mideast, and is a thatched hut in sub-Sarah Africa, and a half-Cape in Barnstable, and a split-level in Sandwich….

 People often wonder who God is, and what God really wants of us. They worry about whether they will ever be holy enough or disciplined enough or wise enough or have the time in their busy lives for the spiritual practices which will enable them to climb up to God. Whether they have to watch those weekly Bible Refresher in 5 videos that I put out, join in the video prayer group, or attend Bible Study religiously. All good things, of course. But the good news of Christmas is that all you have to do is to be human, to be made of flesh and bone, because God has taken on our flesh and our bones; you don’t have to climb up to God because God climbed down to you.

 So, what difference does that make for you? Well, the truth of the matter is that our homes seldom match up to the ideal of home held out to us by Ozzie and Harriet of olden days, or by the love which abounds in the home of George Bailey in the mythic cinematic Bedford Falls. Our experiences of unconditional love are far rarer than we prefer to admit; our longing for the *Cheers* bar, where everybody knows your name, demonstrates how short our everyday reality of alienation and disconnection comes from that ideal.

 But while our world lets us down time and again, our celebrations of Christmas remind us that God never has and never will. That love came down on Christmas Day and moved right into your home and your heart; that love, unconditional love, is offered to you each and every morning by your loving Creator.

 So, my little birds, the barn door has been flung wide open. So here is the Christmas question for you, for all of us: Will you cower in the cold and snow, or will you come to the one who has come to offer you light, and warmth, and love, and life, and not just life, but life abundant, life eternal, the life that really is life? Will you come this day, will you come on Christmas Day, will you come on Saturdays at 4:30 or Sundays at 10:00, will you come every day you feel cold and sad and alone or hurt or angry or afraid or unloved?

 For this is the meaning of Christmas, that God has come to our house, and invites you to come home, and invites *you*, to come home.