

Advent - John 1:14 - ADVENT 3-Emotions of Christmas: Apathy & Awe

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

This Christmas season, we are considering our hearts together to allow the Christmas story to engage with and shape our deepest emotions.

It's a story we've been reading about and singing about already this morning. As we've been talking about how it impacts our hearts, we've talked about our longing and hope, our grief and comfort in the Christmas story.

This morning, we're going to look at a slightly different pair of emotions, apathy and awe. Apathy and awe.

We're going to do that this morning as we look at John chapter 1. John's account of the Christmas story, you may know, focuses a little bit differently from angels and shepherds and wise men.

[1 : 05] John takes a little bit more philosophical and theological look at the incarnation. As the Son of God comes, John explains the significance of that and he goes all the way back to creation in order to do it.

We're going to look primarily at verse 14 this morning, but let's read the whole glorious prologue to John's Gospel. John chapter 1, verses 1 through 18.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

[2 : 16] He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John bore witness about him and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me. And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.

The grass withers, the flowers fade. These words of our God will stand forever. Let's pray together and ask for His help as we look at them. Father, thank you for the joy of celebrating the gift of a Savior.

[3 : 35] As Ron has already helped us remember, we are needy people. Far off from you by nature. Father, you have come to bring us near.

We thank you for this, your Word, that shines light on us, that we might understand what you were doing at Christmas. What was happening, that we might see how that should impact us.

Father, by your Spirit, would you make Jesus glorious in our eyes. He is great and awesome with our hearts. I see just a glimpse of that this morning through your Word.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Most of you know that I'm not typically a big social or cultural critic. But I have talked with enough people, love talking with people. I've talked to them enough to realize that apathy is on the rise in our culture.

[4 : 43] I think most of you would probably agree with that. It may be apathy in regards to politics for many, in many different ways. Maybe apathy in regard to religion.

Men, increasingly, we're apathetic towards religion. More and more in our culture are happy to be identified as having no interest in religion at all.

We've created a new category, the nuns. N-O-N-E-S. The nuns. They widely outnumber the N-U-N-S. That's how religiously apathetic our culture has become.

Maybe it's apathy toward institutions in general. That you have this real sense of, you can't make me care about anything.

At least anything beyond myself. A friend in my generation, as we were talking recently, said, oftentimes the attitude that he and many of our contemporaries have is, give me a reason to care.

[5 : 47] Maybe you felt that way before. Give me a reason to care. Why should I care? I think part of that apathy that we're seeing grow in our hearts and in our culture is that we're hard to impress, aren't we?

We're just not wowed by anything anymore. Even things that would perhaps seem impressive, we're so skeptical about because we're slow to trust.

Everyone seems to have an agenda. Maybe it's not as impressive as it looks on the outside. But regardless, it's tough to astonish us. Many of us have seen the sun rise and set beautifully over amazing landmarks in multiple different continents.

We've been there. Some of us have grown up in the spectacle that is Disney World is an annual experience through our childhoods.

We're used to being overwhelmed by the amazing. It's all around us. If we haven't actually gotten to go somewhere to see these incredible things in person, we've flipped through jaw-dropping, man-made and natural wonders while lying on the sofa holding our phones, right?

[7 : 05] We've seen it all. The saturation of the information age where it's always available to us and we can get everything means that not only have I seen pictures of all the amazing places I could ever want to go, but I've also heard all the beautiful music by the most gifted musicians that I could ever want to download.

I've seen all the amazing stunts in the videos, the incredible things people can do. I can even become numb to the wonder of sexuality because the perversions of it seem almost ubiquitous just a click away.

It's hard to amaze us. It's very hard to leave me slack-jawed, honestly. I don't stand in wonder often. Can you think about the last time you remember being truly awestruck? Just absolutely stopped dead in your tracks by something you saw or felt or heard?

Can you even remember the last time that happened? Do you remember ever or lately being in awe before God? Truly just marveling in a worship service or with your Bible open in front of you while contemplating the love of God for you.

[8 : 41] You see, John tells us that the story of Christmas is just that jaw-dropping, magnificent, and awe-inspiring.

That's what John's saying in this passage, but we often miss it. You know as well as I do that you've gone through many a Christmas season hearing the story, singing the songs without anything really grabbing your heart and moving it from the apathetic state where we often find ourselves into a great sense of worship or awe or something that transforms how you live.

Next year is often the same. It may be the younger generations that are known for our apathy, but I think those of us who've been in church the longest have a good case of it too.

We've become very apathetic. Just like the young people, we are hard to impress. And partially because of information overload. We know the story, right? We know what happens at Christmas. The incarnation of the Son of God. God becomes man. In fact, we know that it's amazing. We know that. We know it should cause us wonder and awe.

[10 : 00] And we know so much that it is so easy to keep that up here at arm's length from our hearts and just know that it's true. Have we perhaps lost our sense of wonder?

Our ability to marvel, our compelling motivation for utter heartfelt worship of our God. John says in words that may not shock you, but were something utterly earth-shattering to his original audience as he describes the incarnation.

He begins, perhaps not as unexpectedly, talking about the Word, the logos, which a variety of philosophical perspectives, popular at the time of John's writing, they would have understood that as the original principle of life or the source of all things, depending on their persuasion.

Even if you were a Jew in John's audience and had read your Old Testament, the Word would be well known to you as part of God's powerful speaking things into being.

His power in creation that He speaks and things happen, right? So they're reading along thinking, yeah, this makes sense. The Word, who's God, He's in the beginning and creation is happening and things are coming into being, but then God shatters all of their categories.

[11 : 33] No Stoic philosopher, no Gnostic expert, no Jewish rabbi would have skipped over verse 14.

It is intended to be startling and awe-inspiring, to evoke anything from us but apathy. Verse 14, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. The Word became flesh.

Wait. It's not possible. Just picture these people reading it, flipping back to the beginning of the chapter. Hold on, did I miss something? Don't I have this right?

The Word is God. The Word created the world. Yep, I'm good with that. I can fit that into my thinking. But the Word became flesh?

[12 : 40] God became man? In the fullest and truest sense, as plainly as John could possibly mean it, that's quite a claim.

How could that be? If that's true, nothing else would be more important. If that's true, all my categories for approaching life are challenged. It's all up in the air.

If that's true, it changes everything. It can't be ignored. We talk about the wonder of the incarnation, but here it is, just in that one verse, in an unmistakable way, Christmas says, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

the immaterial became material. The completely holy other God lived with and ate with unworthy sinners.

The perfectly pure God dirties His feet in the dust of the earth. The one who is eternally satisfied in Himself hungers and hurts.

[14 : 02] The Almighty God who's worthy of all praise endures mockery, scorn. The infinite is contained in the finite.

The God who is so big that He creates the entire universe and all the solar systems is contained in less than a little pinprick in one planet, in one country, in one manger.

Picture it. You're in front of your TV and you're part of the movie. You're in outer space and you can see the planets lined up and all of a sudden it starts zooming in really fast it zooms in and there's one planet there's earth and there it is where are you going to be?

There's one country there it goes into Bethlehem to the manger. The one who stood outside of all of it who started all of it is held right there.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That means all those things are happening in that one moment in time.

[15 : 13] The words of the beautiful Christmas carol by Frank Houghton Thou who was rich beyond all splendor all for love's sake becamest poor.

Thrones for a manger didst surrender. Sapphire paved courts for stable floor. Thou who was rich beyond all splendor all for love's sake becamest poor.

Thou who art God beyond all praising all for love's sake becamest man. stooping so low but sinners raising heavenwards by thine eternal plan.

Thou who art God beyond all praising all for love's sake becamest man. Y'all this is not someone showing up and being seen somewhere you would never expect to see him.

This is much much more than that. This defies all categories. This crosses all of those boundaries. For the first time in the history of the universe deity and humanity are together in the same person.

[16 : 24] The word became flesh and dwelt among us. Then John says what's the result of that?

We have seen his glory. Glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth.

No one has seen God verse 18 says but Jesus has made him known. He in human flesh has revealed to us divine glory veiled in flesh the Godhead see.

Hail the incarnate deity. He's full of grace and truth revealing the glorious heart of the God who introduced himself to Moses as full of steadfast love and faithfulness grace and truth.

I want to invite you this morning to just wander with me for a few minutes through the gallery of God's glory. Picture yourself as it were in an art gallery just wandering through and catching glimpses of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

[17 : 51] If you're wondering what I'm doing in the next few minutes at which point I'm on I know I usually have points there are usually three of them I'm not on point two or point three that's what we're doing I just want us to wander together and gaze at some glimpses of God's glory look together and see it begins certainly at Christmas at his birth it is indeed the glory of the God of all creation that is due to this baby in a manger in Bethlehem hosts of angels come to proclaim it listen when God has something important to tell people he sends usually an angel to deliver a very important message hosts of angels show up singing glory to God in the highest gloria in excelsis deo shepherds race to the manger and leave glorifying and praising

God for what they have seen sometime later to be historically honest wise men foreign dignitaries who searched for the child upon finding him fall down and worship and offer him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh we have seen his glory John says it's not merely at his birth of course as we look back and walk through the gospels through the life of Jesus he demonstrates the amazing character and glory of God God's grace and truth as you read through the gospels one scene after another Jesus is revealing the glory of God while teaching with unparalleled authority and touching the sick and the diseased we see him walking on water and walking long dusty roads to reach the next town that needs to hear the good news he reveals the father's glorious heart by feeding thousands miraculously more than once and by finding the lost the least the left out and showing the gracious heart of God to reach even to them to love them think of just some of the people that Jesus encounters in the gospels tax collector

Zacchaeus the Samaritan woman at the well the sinful woman anointing him and wiping his feet with her hair the demon possessed man Jesus graciously finds all of them and they encounter this God man full of grace and truth and the one thing you can count on every time you read an encounter with Jesus in the gospels they don't leave unchanged no one encounters Jesus and leaves unchanged of course the glory of God if we're looking for the glory of God his gracious and undefiled character it's perhaps most evident as he goes to the cross where he's lifted up but not to be worshipped but rather to die the God of life who gives breath to all of creation in the person of Jesus will now face death itself the Lord of life expires the eternally living one dies all for love's sake for you he dies things but there's something about Christmas isn't there about the incarnation of the son of God that seems to be prominent in every look back at the glory of God and the rest of the scriptures when you leave the gospels and start to see the scriptures reflect on the glory of God never leaves out the very beginning of Jesus coming to be born all the great new testament Christ hymns we're just going to marvel at a couple of them this morning the word became flesh and we have seen his glory

Colossians 1 we read together earlier he is the image of the invisible God the one who makes the father known who makes the invisible visible the intangible tangible and not just like some imperfect replica some knock off copy made to kind of pretend or look like no he is so perfectly God that if you have seen him you've seen the father if you know Jesus he says you know the father perfect holiness in human flesh he's the firstborn of all creation the baby in the manger is the ruler the one in charge of not just the animals gathered around him not just the people who are there mother father shepherds but of all of creation most of which is completely unaware of his presence after all he created all of it but even more than that all things were created through him and for him he's the reason that all of it exists in the first place that tiny baby that most of creation stands entirely unaware of that shepherds of all people race to worship is the highest glory of all of creation its greatest purpose the reason for its existence is right there verse 17 in him all things hold together [24 : 47] Ron and I were marveling about this earlier this week and he said to me Jesus the baby in the manger is the glue of the entire creation he's being held by his mother but the power of his will holds all of creation and every single molecule together and Mary's holding him verse 19 in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell of course that means in the person of Jesus right but think because of that where does it mean that all the fullness of God was pleased was delighted to

dwell in Bethlehem with us God

God didn't just send a message to earth he didn't just send a representative he sent his very self fully God fully man he sent his very self on the mission to reconcile us to him unbelievable incredible in a manger God himself contained Josiah Condor wrote some beautiful words to a hymn you're probably not familiar with that captures some of what's going on here thou art the everlasting word the father's only son God manifestly seen and heard and heaven's beloved one worthy O Lamb of God art thou that every knee to thee should bow in thee most perfectly expressed the father's glory shine of the full deity possessed eternally divine true image of the infinite whose essence is concealed brightness of uncreated light the heart of

God revealed but the high mysteries of thy name and angels grasp transcend the father only glorious claim the son can comprehend throughout the universe of bliss the center thou and son the eternal theme of praise of this to heaven's beloved one worthy O Lamb of God art thou that every knee to thee should bow you'll hear many similar themes in Hebrews chapter one long ago at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son whom he appointed the heir of all things through whom also he created the world he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature and he upholds the universe by the word of his power after making purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high having inherited is more excellent than theirs just one thought while we wonder here in

Hebrews 1 he is the radiance of the glory of God the most glorious shining of the glory of the most glorious being of all it's like saying baby Jesus is the brightest ray of the light of the sun the holiest thing about the most holy one the bluest of all blues you can imagine the most glorious shining of the glory of the most glorious one where is it where do you find that great glory in heaven right in the throne room of God no in little Bethlehem the radiance of the glory of

God has come to earth with us God has held nothing back last one Philippians chapter two another beautiful Christ him Christ Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped what's going on at Christmas y'all what's happening very God of very God has determined that his deity is not something to be clung to tightly he's loosened his grasp on the glories of heaven why you know why don't you why did he let go of the glories of heaven so that he could cling tightly to you he came here for you he loosened his grip on the glories of heaven so he could cling tightly to us glory incredible why we don't deserve that and yet he loves us that's what's happening in the manger in

[30 : 51] Bethlehem see him there seemingly so weak and helpless but powerfully grabbing hold of us in love grace and truth you want to know what God is like that's it that's what he's like he's full of grace and truth moving towards you at your lowest and your weakest sacrificing his glory for your glory and Paul continues he made himself nothing taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of

Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father what a glorious savior worthy of all praise because he is the glorious one and he has given himself to us see there is one last thing I don't want you to miss this morning as you look at the baby in the manger the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory we have seen his glory stop for just a minute and ask yourself some of you have read the Bible the Old Testament what happens when we see God's glory when a man beholds the glory of God he dies right every time in the Old Testament that's the concern there's a poignant scene in Exodus 33 where Moses asks if he could see God's glory Moses says please show me your glory and God says I'll make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name the Lord Yahweh and I'll be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy but he said what you're asking Moses there's a but but you cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live the Lord said behold there's a place by me where you shall stand on the rock and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until

I have passed by then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back but my face shall not be seen if we see the fullness of God's glory we die right Jesus has come as the fullness of God's glory it couldn't be clearer the radiance of God's glory we've seen it but what happens we don't die he

dies so that we can live wonder of wonders unimaginable to anyone up to this point in time that you could behold the glory of God and live and it happens person after person and John testifies and says we have seen his glory because we are hidden safely in the baby who came to die in our place we behold

God's glory and we live the wonder of the incarnation is that God becomes man precisely to die for men I think that's why you may have noticed that it's not just Christmas it's not just the incarnation that plays prominently in every one of the Christ hymns we read this morning the incarnation and the crucifixion are always there together they're so connected in these New Testament hymns that are praising his glory it's because the cross is the goal of the manger right and the cross destroys apathy two two two thousand years ago well attested in various histories a man hung on a cross and died and you can't be apathetic about that event it's too horrific to stay apathetic about either he deserved to die as a criminal or he really was there taking your place saving your soul revealing [36 : 06] God's glory to you full of grace and truth the Roman soldier witnessed the crucifixion and said surely this was the son of God others rejected him but one thing is certain for those who encountered Jesus apathy was off the table half hearted interest not an option they grumbled were they marveled they plotted or they worshipped they rejected him or they embraced him oh it is really okay with me I get apathy I'm totally fine if we remain apathetic to some things may Jesus never be one of them may we never find apathy in our hearts about the son of God becoming man for us y'all Christmas offers us the glory of a God so utterly beyond us and different from us who insists on not remaining distant apart from us he finds a way to show us his glory without it costing us our lives the word who became flesh the image of the invisible God the radiance of God's glory gives his life instead amazing no one has ever seen God but the only God who is at the Father's side he has made him known let's pray Lord Jesus we struggle to comprehend how that could be possible we don't understand how

God works enough to know how he could contain himself in a baby in a manger it is a wonder of wonders to us that for all the people and reasons you might be willing to do that she would do it for us Jesus would that wonder never leave us Holy Spirit so work in our hearts that while apathy to some things remain apathy towards Jesus would never come again might we worship him might we find our hope in him might we find our rest and joy forever in him we ask in his name amen