Book 3

Sunday March 24, 1974

"GOD HAS COME TO US" John 3:16-17, II Corinthians 5:16-19
(No. 4 in a series on the Statement of Faith)

What is the Christian religion? How would you define the Christian faith? What is it all about? This question gets all kinds of answers. "The Christian faith is the 10 commandments," says one person." "It's obeying the golden rule," says another. "It's belonging to the church," is another answer. And there are many more answers, some partly true, others far removed. The point is, for many people the Christian religion is many times thought of in terms of our having to do something, of our obeying rules or commandments, or fulfilling requirements.

But the Christian religion is first and foremost and essentially a distinctive message about God. It is not primarily a new ethic. It is not just a gospel of brotherliness and loving our neighbor. It is not in the main a philosophy of life or a social program. To be sure, all these issue from it--it involves an ethic, supplies a philosophy, proclaims love for all persons; but at the foundation, at the center, basically--it is a message about God--about what God has done, what He is doing and what He will continue to do. Thus, the Statement of Faith which we are considering during this Lenten Season is God-centered. It is a statement about God and reminds us what God has done and continues to do.

Thus in previous sermons in this series, we have talked about God in terms of his activity, his creating, his seeking to save us, and his judging.

Today we come to the very center of the message about God which our faith proclaims and upon which it is built. The Statement of Faith puts it this way: "IN JESUS CHRIST, THE MAN OF NAZARETH, OUR CRUCIFIED AND RISEN LORD, GOD HAS COME TO US AND SHARED OUR COMMON LOT, CONQUERING SIN AND DEATH AND RECONCILING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF."

This distinctive message about God coming to us in Christ is so much the center of our faith that in this Statement of Faith it is put right in the center. The entire Statement has seven sentences and this one about God coming to us in Jesus Christ is right in the middle; there are three statements before it and three after.

God creates, God seeks, God judges! Then the central proclamation--In Jesus Christ, God has come to us. Such is the dramatic and astounding statement on which our faith is built. Possibly familiarity has dulled its wonder for us. Our hope is that this morning we can realize anew how electrifying, how startling, how revolutionary this activity of God is. Let's look at it more closely again.

1. IN JESUS CHRIST, THE MAN OF NAZARETH, OUR CRUCIFIED AND RISEN LORD, GOD HAS COME TO US AND SHARED OUR COMMON LOT! What are we saying?

First of all, we are proclaiming that God enters our world in a way we can understand best, in a person, and in a personal way. In the little country of Palestine, about 2000 years ago, God was uniquely focused in Jesus of Nazareth, and because of that event, God continues to be present among persons.

This man Jesus was a complete human being. He grew up in the little town of Nazareth and for the greater part of his life was a working carpenter in the same town. He was born and raised a Jew, in the long tradition of the Hebrew religion.

He wrote no books, his friends were mostly common ordinary people, fishermen and peasants and the outcasts of society. When he began his public ministry, his own family tried to dissuade him. The theologians and clever people were not impressed by him.

The crowds at first gathered inquisitively to listen to his teaching and many came to be healed of their diseases. His teaching, his vocabulary, his rhetoric, his style were solidly in the Jewish tradition.

As he went about his ministry, he began to gather enemies as well as followers as he preached about human problems and human relationships and interpreted these in the light of the religious heritage and tradition. Jesus's interpretation was sweeping and radical to the establishment. He was in the best sense of the term, a religious revolutionary in that he offered a profound challenge to the way human beings lived their lives and organized their societies. He was also a mystic visionary who taught that God is near us all the time, this day, this minute in loving intimacy.

He was also an extraordinarily attractive and charming human being. The gentleness and wisdom and the poetic insight of the traditions that can be traced directly to him are impressive and appealing even to those who reject all the developments in Christianity since the time of Jesus.

But he was also too much for his own contemporaries. He was arrested, tried and executed as a criminal. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves and buried in a borrowed tomb, and that should have been the end of that. An itinerant Galilean rabbi , with a ragtag band of followers, living in the midst of immense religious ferment on the fringes of the Roman Empire--hardly worth noticing. The stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb, and he ought to have been promptly forgotten.

But he wasn't! For something strange happened. It was rumored that death had not finished him. It was reported that he had been seen alive. And then quite suddenly, the same disciples who had deserted him, appeared in the streets proclaiming that he had risen. They said he had come back to them. They now had his power. Instead of being in one place, he was now everywhere.

Was it surprising that the world hearing that, tried to laugh it to scorn? But the story continued to circulate and the extraordinary thing is that neither the laughter nor the force of the Roman Empire, nor anything else could stop the message of Jesus. The persistence of Jesus in life was a validation of his message.

2. Secondly, in addition to saying that in Jesus Christ God has come to us and is with us as persons, we are also saying that God is with us in every aspect of life and death, that from the depth of our troubles to the height of our joy, God is among us.

We know this because Jesus was in all things as we are. He was first a baby, then a little child and he grew to be an adult. He knew weariness, hunger, thirst, anger, joy, suffering, sadness, and even death, just as we come to know all of these things in our lives. As the Statement of Faith puts it, God shared our common lot.

Jesus' emotional life was much like our own. He was sometimes surprised at the faith of some people and sometimes disheartened. He was compassionate and sometimes he got angry. He knew sorrow--he wept at the grave of Lazarus,

his friend. He enjoyed parties and having a good time. He shared our common lot in all things. Again, this is a way of telling us something about God and the way God shares our lives and is with us in all things.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, God has shared our common lot, even suffering and death. And God continues to do so. God identifies totally with his creation and with us human beings.

We all know what it means to us as persons when another person identifies with us and is totally present at whatever level we are.

The story is told about a preacher who was seeking out a newcomer in town who worked in the Round House at the Baltimore and Ohio railroad yards. When the preacher finally located the man, he found him repairing an engine. "Sorry, I can't shake hands with you, Preacher," the man said, holding up hands black with dirt and engine grease. Impulsively, the preacher stooped over and rubbed his hands in the dirt that lay on the floor. "Now there's no difference between us," he said. "You see sir, I want to shake your hand." That man was the preacher's friend for life.

It has been said that the one characteristic those whom we call saints have in common, is identification. Through some mysterious process, only dimly perceived by the rest of us, they are able to identify with the full range of creation.

They identify with the leper and the criminal; with the disfigured and the stupid; with the thief and the alien; with the coward and the heretic; with the hippy and the square; with the beast in the field and the bird in the air and the fish in the sea. They comprehend the sharingness of creation.

This is the kind of person Jesus was. He could identify with Zacchaeus, the cripple, the prostitute, the mentally ill, the little child and the old person. He saw the human being in each individual. Thus he could move among the poor, the afflicted and the outcasts, as well as the healthy and the rich.

And the message of Jesus is that God identifies with all of us in the same way. God has come to us and shares our

common lot and we are to do the same.

Furthermore, in being truly human, Jesus also shows us what true humanity is to be. Jesus calls us to fulfill our true potential.

To say that in Jesus Christ, God has come to us is also to say that God doesn't wait for us to come to him; God comes to us. In our human relationships and in international relationships we often worry about who is going to make the first move to overcome a break in the relationship. We fret about "saving face" and standing on our pride or status. But God's not worried about saving face, he make the first move toward us. He tramps out the path, clears the way. He comes all the way in quest of us.

One person put it this way. God did not remain at base headquarters receiving reports of the world's suffering and rebellion and trouble and then shout a few encouraging words to us from a safe distance--like--"try harder." No, he left the headquarters and came to us in the front line trenches, right to where we live and worry about the things that trouble us, our illness, our suffering, the evil all around us and within us. God came right into the middle of all this and shared our common lot.

And this leads us to the last part of the statement about Jesus Christ--not only has God come to us and shared our common lot, but through his coming to us he is conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

Let's see if we can put this into our own experience. Fosdick used to say, "Tell me that Jesus is only an individual man and that I must be like him, and I quit; at that point I know myself well enough to quit. Tell me, however, that Christ is the revelation of the Eternal Spirit, opening up a realm of divine life and power into which I too can enter and that is good news. Then humbly, but really I can face Christ; I can say, Spirit of God decend upon my heart."

And this is what the coming of Christ means. It tells us that the power of God is loose in the world, throughout all creation and it has the ability to transform human relationships, in fact, it is transforming and working throughout creation itself. God is reconciling the world to himself.

Let's put it another way for emphasis. If Jesus is only our ideal, then it's some help, but not enough. But if he is our Saviour too, then the doors of hope begin to open. We have enough ideals; in fact, the ideals we have for ourselves are kind of disheartening because we are usually so far from them. We have only to look at what we human beings do to one another each day; sin and death are all around us.

But God's coming to us in Jesus Christ is more than an example or ideal; God works with us to help us out of our situation so that we become fully human persons. God helps us conquer sin and death.

And what does this mean for us here and now? It means the knowledge within ourselves that we are now inseparabley connected with the eternal life of God; so that there is nothing that life can do, and nothing that death can do to interfere with this relationship.

And more than that, it means that since Christ is alive and well able to supply the spiritual needs of those who trust him, that the Christian religion and life itself are no longer seen as a grim battle or a lonely joyless pilgrimage; but rather as life lived with the very vitality of God within us and within the world.

So when you are lonely and depressed, remember God is there with you, right down in the depths. When you are joyous, remember God is there too; when you weep, God weeps with you; he shares our common lot.

Problems will still arise. Temptations will come. There will be rumors of war and maybe even war itself. We still have to work each day; our loved ones will die and so will we. But in all of this, God is with us. Behold the dwelling of God is with people. In all of this, we live in a redeemed world! Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What puzzles you most about Jesus Christ?

2. Try to describe in your own words what the coming of God in Jesus Christ means to you personally.

3. What are some of the ways in which you see Christ at work in the world today?

4. Discuss what "God sharing our common lot," means to you in today's world.

5. Discuss how God's coming to us in Christ, helps conquer sin and death.