

# WHEN GOD UNDRESSED

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The Word Became Flesh | Mystery Series (Part 4) | Text: John 1:14

**Welcome & Invitations**  
**Processional Hymn Medley**  
**The Bible Proclaims Christ's Coming**  
**Come, Come, Emmanuel (Choir)**

As Christmas came that year, the world was in tumult. The government was on the verge of implementing a major revision of the tax code that had people worrying and scurrying. Sexual harassment and abuse was such entrenched practice in the society that stories abounded. Multiple times over the past year, there had been heart-breaking reports of religiously-motivated zealots committing violent acts of terror. The nation's chief executive was clearly focused on securing the country, but he was the most controversial leader anyone could remember. Some admired him as just the kind of bold, blunt, independent leader the nation needed in this time. Others reviled him for a leadership style that frequently felt narcissistic, capricious, even brutal.

I am talking, of course, about King Herod of Judea and life in Palestine during the First Century of the Common Era. In those days, the undisputed capitol of Israel was Jerusalem. The great MYSTERY of this moment, however, is that it wasn't what Herod was doing there, or what Caesar Augustus was doing in Rome, or what Quirinius was doing up in Syria that would turn out to alter history most. It was what the Ultimate Ruler – the King of Kings -- was doing, in the womb of a woman, through the life of a poor family, in a little town called Bethlehem...

***The First Noel / Pachelbel's Canon (Choir)***

Had there been journalists in the First Century, I can imagine they'd have made an issue of the fact that, with all the challenges the country was facing, King Herod spent so much time out of the capitol and down at his lavish palace in the south. Herod's personal retreat was a resort he had named after himself. The *Herodium* was known for its towers – four of them, actually, each seven stories high, and connected at the base by a complex of garden courtyards. The palace sported a domed bathhouse spa, an ornate theater, multiple banquet rooms, a long colonnaded walkway, and extravagant living quarters with mosaic floors and hand-painted frescoes. The whole magnificent complex sat atop an artificial hill that Herod had built to give him a commanding view over his neighbors. And there, Herod lived the life of comfort and pleasure we associate with royalty and celebrity and sometimes aspire to ourselves.

It's important to note, however, that not all people with huge capacity aspire to self-elevation. Sometimes the signature achievement of the greatest minds and hearts is not how high they build up, but how low they stoop down...

### ***Joseph's Lullaby (Bill Combs)***

My English cousin, Lauder, was just a child of three years-old when I visited him in London. I put him on my shoulders and carried him in my arms on a long walk one memorable afternoon long ago. It was June of 1981 and almost every public wall or lamppost carried a poster of Charles, the Prince of Wales, and the beautiful, bashful woman who would soon become his bride. Each time we passed one of the posters, Lauder would point a chubby finger and cry out, "*There's Diana!*" It was immensely cute -- the first five times. By the fifteenth time, however, it was getting old; and, so, when we arrived home, I asked his mother, Enid, what the child's obsession with royalty was. "*You don't know?*" she said. "*No, I don't,*" I replied. Enid smiled: "*Diana Spencer is Lauder's preschool teacher -- and he's been invited to the wedding.*"

It's a delightful story, isn't it? But what if it was true for you? What if the greatest kind of royalty stooped down and cared for you, with the kind of tender, patient, hopeful, understanding, love that great teachers show to preschool children? Better yet, what if you could be wed to that kind of love for all eternity? The message of Christmas is that God cares for humanity with this kind of endless love. And, even if you have never taken that love into your heart before, it is possible... still...

### ***Still Still Still (Choir)***

It's strange how fascinated our world still is with royalty. You've noticed that, right? Have you also noticed how much commentary surrounds the clothing that royals wear? First it was Diana. Then it was Kate Middleton. Now it's Prince Harry's bride, American actress, Meghan Markle, who's being admired for her impeccable fashion. Heck, she's even the star of TV show called SUITS! You'd almost think that the most impressive attribute of royalty is how they dress? And most royals – the real ones and the kind that live in American palaces – put an almost Herod-like investment into looking good.

Phillip Yancey describes a visit that Queen Elizabeth made to the U.S., and how reporters salivated in spelling out all the fuss involved. They talked about how her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every scheduled occasion, a mourning outfit (in case someone died), forty pints of plasma (in case she was injured), and white kid-leather toilet seat covers (in case, you can figure out why). The Queen travelled with her own hairdresser, two valets, and a stable of other well-dressed attendants. A royal visit to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars.<sup>1</sup>

I know this seems scandalous to many of us; but I have a friend who says it isn't all bad. In fact, he said he's starting to wish we could adopt the English system here in America. "*Really?*" I asked. "*Why?*" "*Well, that way,*" he said, "*when our politicians, bosses, and entertainers are behaving poorly, we'd at least have a Royal Family to focus on. We'd still have a model of civility, charity, and grace that was always with us -*

*- something beautiful and good to lift us up in the midst of our mess and inspire us to carry on."*

I think my friend has a point. But then I go back to the question I asked earlier: What if that's already true? What if we've already got a Royal Presence with us who has been trying to lift us up, to help us carry on, to wed his life to ours? And is it possible that some of us have turned him down...

### ***Sweet Little Jesus Boy (Erika Morrison)***

I want to advance tonight a simple proposition: The kind of nobility that inspires us all toward the higher standard of living this world now especially needs -- the greatest kind of royalty -- is not recognized by the towers they live in or the fashions they put on, so much as by the floors they have come down and the way they undress – and I don't mean in the way that some in the news apparently have.

The Bible teaches that every notion of royalty we have from our experience in this world, is only a hint at the Ultimate Royalty that really is. Scriptures speak of God as the ultimate king or "King of Kings." We are not to confuse him with the Herods of this world who, for a season, have been graciously granted some earthly influence, and who will be held accountable for whether they managed it wisely and well.

The King of King's natural dwelling is a place so spectacularly glorious that the Bible reaches unsuccessfully for metaphorical images sufficient to describe it – sometimes using words like "palace" or "courts." The Book of Revelation pictures it as a place where the streets are made of gold and the walls of jewels and the gates are encrusted with pearls and there is flourishing abundance and clear water and never any death or crying or pain. Again, these are just metaphors to describe the towering splendor where the King dwells, but Scripture teaches that: **"Better is one day in [the true King's] courts than a thousand elsewhere" (Psa 84:10).**

God is "robed in splendor" (Isa 63:1) the Bible says, and wraps himself in light. He is the most intelligent, powerful, and holy being you can imagine in your wildest dreams. And every minute of every day, he is adored and attended upon by angelic creatures so awesome in themselves that you or I, or a shepherd out in their field, would be very afraid if we got even a glimpse of them.

But here is where the ultimate MYSTERY comes in. The Bible teaches that though he was and had and lived amidst all of this, **"He did not consider [it] something to be used to his own advantage..."** other translations read: **"He did not consider all these privileges something to be grasped... rather, GOD UNDRESSED, he made himself nothing... by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:6-7).**

In other words, the King moved from the most sublime palace you could imagine to a drafty barn. He left inconceivable wealth and splendor to go live in one of the poorest towns, in one of the least regarded provinces, of the yet undeveloped world. He exchanged the company of angels for uneducated peasants. He traded in a rapturously pleasurable and effortless life for hunger, fatigue, persecution. He surrendered an untouchable life for an agonizing death that would pay for the sins and pave the way of forgiveness for people who rejected him, misunderstood him, or took him for granted.

This is something of what St. John means when he simply says: **"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14)**. The divine intelligence and power in which all life begins and continues and gets reconstituted – that's what the Greek term "Logos" or "Word" really means – this Light and Life – DISROBED. He undressed himself -- not to take advantage of anyone else, but to offer help to everyone else. The invulnerable King became naked, goose-bumped, baby flesh -- subject to every risk that threatens, tempts, and torments you and me.

Take that in, will you? It's not a fairy tale. It happened. Really think about what God did at Christmas, as we rise to sing these familiar carols...

### ***Christmas Peace (Choir & Congregation)***

WHY did the greatest intelligence and power in the Universe voluntarily strip himself of all the privileges and prerogatives he had and live the life on earth that Jesus did? It's not what powerful, privileged, people normally do. So, how do you explain this MYSTERY? Here are a few theories to take with you tonight.

Theory #1: **God loves us.** Have you seen the way Prince Harry looks at his fiancée? Do you know the way some of you look at your kids or your grandchildren? Are you aware of how you feel about your very best friend? God regards YOU like that, only MUCH more. You are precious to him. He knows your story. He came to earth to show you that he understands from the inside how tough this life can be. Whatever you are facing right now... You are not alone. He is Immanuel – God with you. Every politician, product, program, and person will sooner or later let you down. But not the King. He loves you and is with you and for you, always.

And here's my second theory as to why the King undressed and took on flesh: **Jesus came to show us the Way.** Remember my friend who wondered if we wouldn't be better off if we had royalty to look to, instead of the poor examples who sometimes sully our public life? He was right. The Apostle John says that **the Word became flesh and dwelt among... and we have beheld his glory... full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)**. Once upon a time, the early church beheld the glory of Christ. Staring continually into the face of Jesus changed them. They became people of unusual grace and integrity who transformed their times.

If we want to renew and improve the quality of our families, workplaces, church, and society in our time, then the surest way is to turn our eyes upon Jesus too. Crafting better policies and programs is surely needed; but the most effective way to transform this world is by crafting better people. People who follow and learn of Jesus become those better people. So, let's ask ourselves as we move into this New Year: Where am I going to behold Jesus, so his grace and truth can grow more fully in me? If you don't have a church home where you are regularly doing that, let me challenge you to find one and also let you know how welcome you'd be here.

- And then, one more question to take with you as you go. Given all that God was willing to surrender in order to come alongside the needs of human beings: What am I grasping too tightly that I could give up, for the sake of others? Is my pride blocking me from forgiving someone? Is my need to be right or in control stopping me from better relationships with others? Is my hunger for more praise or recognition or comfort, something that I could lay down tonight in order to lift others up? What do you and I need to disrobe ourselves of, so that we can be more like Jesus?

As our ushers come forward to receive our Christmas offering, let's think on these questions and remember this: On this holy night, the King of Kings is calling you...

### **Offertory Solo: *O Holy Night (Olga Bojovic 7/11 & Kate Niemiec 9)***

### **A Prayer at Christmas (Worship Assistants)**

Please pray with me...

*[To be scripted by assisting pastor]*

And now, would you stand with me, as we join our voices with God's grateful subjects in heaven and earth, singing together: "*Joy to the World!*"

### ***Joy to the World (Choir & Congregation)***

### **Benediction**

### **Postlude**

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<sup>1</sup> *Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew (Zondervan, 1995)*