

Nativity Scenes and a Theology of Icons

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, December 10, 2023
PASSAGES	Exodus 20:4-6; Exodus 20:1-3; Romans 6:14; Genesis 9:6; Deuteronomy 4:15-16; Deuteronomy 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-31; John 5:39; John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15; John 14:9; 2 John 7; Romans 6:5
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:30:51 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The second commandment has a reason behind it, and the reason is this: Israel had never seen God, so they were not to fill in the blank with their imagination and stick his name on it. The incarnation changes the situation entirely. God the Son really took flesh, and people really saw him — so the baby in the manger is not a violation of that command. It is the confession that holds the whole faith together.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Before you argue with a commandment, find out why God gave it. Deuteronomy supplies the why behind the second commandment, and the why is what decides this question.
- ◆ Two things God is protecting: don't invent a god and call him Yahweh, and don't worship the true God the way the nations worshiped their gods.
- ◆ "You don't know what I look like" was a true statement at Horeb. It is not a true statement after Bethlehem.
- ◆ Answering this by splitting Jesus into a human part you may depict and a divine part you may not is worse than the problem — that is Nestorianism, and the union is not separable.
- ◆ "We're not under the law" is technically true and persuades nobody, because it skips the question of what God's heart was in the command.

- ◆ The real modern danger is not a painted figurine. It is taking an approach to God from the culture around us — moralism, niceness, a rulebook religion — and putting a Jesus sticker on it.
- ◆ A nativity scene is not primarily art, and it is not worship. It is theology: an insistence that this actually happened, in public, in flesh you could have touched.
- ◆ He did not shed his humanity at the resurrection. A resurrected man is on the throne, and that is where this is all heading for us too.

► 1:30:51

Matt introduced this one as “a borderline good idea sermon,” and he was honest about the risk: a decent share of the room has never run into the controversy he was about to spend twenty-five minutes on, and by God’s grace never will. But it is growing on the internet, some of the preachers pushing it are people Hope Chapel folks listen to, and a few people have quietly wondered whether they should leave the baby out of the manger this year. So he took it on, and kept it short.

1. The objection, stated fairly

► 1:31:35

The concern — Matt’s word for it was “concern trolling” — is that a nativity scene containing an actual baby Jesus breaks the second commandment. Same objection gets aimed at *The Chosen* and at *The Passion of the Christ*. Rather than caricature it, he went and listened to the people making it and then laid out their reasoning as strongly as he could.

► 1:33:59

It starts at [Exodus 20:1–3](#) — I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, you shall have no other gods before me. Monotheism. Then the next lines:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”

EXODUS 20:4–6 ↗

The load-bearing phrase for the objection is *any likeness*. That is why it does not help to say the figurine is painted rather than carved, or that a television series is not a statue. Matt also noted, in passing, that “you shall not bow down to them or serve them” reads as a separate thought from “do not make them”

— and that the threat and the promise in verses 5 and 6 are a contrast, iniquity visited on three or four generations while they are still hating, steadfast love shown to thousands.

His own answer, he said, did not need to be creative. The church argued this out and settled it at a council in AD 787 that both East and West still recognize, and that council did not merely permit an image of Christ. It said having one is good.

2. Two answers that do not work

► 1:36:21

The first bad answer: *that's only his humanity, not his divinity*. Matt warned the room off it hard. When God the Son became man the union was perfect. “It’s not like Jesus had a God day and then a man day where he went to the salon,” he said. There were no God moments and man moments. You cannot take a little knife and separate the two — there is a nerdy word for trying, Nestorianism, after a man named Nestorius.

► 1:37:19

The second bad answer:

“sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” True — we are not Theocratic Israelites. But it persuades no one, because the obvious comeback is that you still don’t murder people. And the comeback is fair, because it exposes a lazy way of reading the Bible. Go back to Genesis 9:6, long before Moses: to shed blood unlawfully is to destroy someone who bears God’s image. There is a deep theological why underneath that command, and every person — rich, poor, beautiful, weird — carries immense value to God. So the question for the second commandment is the same question. What is the why?

3. The why behind the commandment

► 1:39:01

“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.”

DEUTERONOMY 4:15-16 ↗

The list runs on exhaustively — animals, birds, creeping things, fish. Two things come out of it. First, don’t just make stuff up and call it Yahweh. That is exactly what happened with the golden calf: nobody

said “this is calf guy.” They said this is the God who brought you out of Egypt. Getting the name right does not license inventing the rest. Second, *you did not see me, so do not fill in the blanks with your imagination*. Don’t condescend God’s glory down to something you can grasp — our god is cunning like a snake, so we give him a snake’s head; our god is strong like a bull, so we make a cow.

► 1:40:52

Then Deuteronomy 12:1–3 sharpens it. Tear down the altars, break the pillars, burn the Asherim — “because you shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.” Not: do not worship those gods. That was the first commandment. This is: do not worship *me* the way they worship theirs.

“Take care that you be not ensnared to follow them... and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? — that I also may do the same.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.”

DEUTERONOMY 12:29–31 ↗

► 1:43:03

So point one: God gets to be in charge of how he is worshiped. You might think that as long as you have the right God you should be free to honor him however you like, but God evidently cares that his people not learn things about him through false worship that are not true of him, or that demean his glory and leave everyone with an inferior view of him. Keep that in mind, Matt said, because it is the reason the whole argument is about to flip.

4. The Jesus sticker

► 1:44:07

Before the flip, he pressed the danger where it actually lives for us. We are perfectly capable of adopting an approach to God from the culture around us and slapping a Jesus sticker on it. Moralism, for instance — pick your poison, the rule-follower version or the sweet-pea kindness version — and then call legalism or niceness the way of Jesus. Or treating the Bible as a handbook of dos and don’ts, which misses the heart of it entirely:

you search the Scriptures thinking that in them you have life, and it is they that bear witness about me. We live-action role play as Old Testament Israelites, zoom in on one legal command, and behave as if Christ’s fulfillment of every promise means nothing to us.

5. We did not make this up

► 1:46:47

Here is the turn. The heart of the command was *don't invent me* and *you don't know what I look like*. Well — God the Son taking human flesh is not something we invented. It was his idea and his plan. And if it seems humiliating to depict him as a person, Matt said, slow down: “Whoa, whoa, whoa — it was an act of humility for him to really do it. That’s the real act of humility. You want to see something humbling, it’s the actual Lord of glory becoming a baby — and you’ve seen a baby, right?” He did not take on fake humanity. “He didn’t wear a fake rubber-glove human-looking suit while not actually embracing real humanity. He became an actual baby, and you know what those look like.” So run the command’s own test on the manger: did we make up the incarnation, and do we know what humans look like?

► 1:47:25

“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 1:14 ↗

He didn’t *appear* like flesh, Matt pressed — he became flesh, in reality. At Horeb they saw no form. Here, John says *we have seen* — the same note John sounds again when he writes about what he has heard, seen with his eyes and touched with his hands. When the Pharisees picked up rocks, were they squinting into an impenetrable cloud? “No. What they saw was what they thought was just a man pretending to be God — but they saw him. You better believe it.” And when he healed people, he touched them with human hands, actual real fingers. If you want to retreat to “but the figurine doesn’t look exactly like him” — “did anybody say this was a photo? It’s not a photo. We’re depicting something.”

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

COLOSSIANS 1:15 ↗

Image, Matt pointed out, is the word *icon*. And the payoff of it is not abstract but physical, and he let himself enjoy it: “We could see him, we could touch him — we weirdo sinners, yeah, we could touch him. We could hug him. We could share a meal with him. We could look at him.” That is also why the ancient church did not flinch at depicting Father, Son and Spirit together, often giving the Father features borrowed from the Son — because Philip asked to be shown the Father and got “have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

6. Not art, not worship — theology

► 1:50:22

This is where Matt doubled back to dismiss the third weak answer, the one that concedes too much: *it's okay as long as you're not worshiping it*. “No, it's not just barely okay. This is super duper awesome.” A nativity scene with a baby in it is not primarily art — though he allowed that Hope's is pretty artful — and it is not worship. It is theology: a standing insistence that God the Son took real flesh, that it really happened, that it was witnessed, “and you could have seen it if you were there. You could have touched him. You could have gone to the stable if you were with the shepherds and looked at crying baby Jesus, or sleeping baby Jesus.” It wasn't an illusion. It wasn't pretend. He really did it.

► 1:50:50

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

2 JOHN 7 ↗

Antichrist, he noted, is not primarily “Bill Gates or something in the future, going to take over the world with his robots.” At its core it is opposition to the message that God the Son took flesh. And that opposition is not hypothetical — it has been the house style of a good deal of Continental European theology for two centuries: the Bible as a nice book of stories, “a map to ideas and meanings,” where it doesn't much matter whether Jesus was really born or died or was resurrected so long as you get the concept — dying to self, finding life. It uses all the same words. “That is not Christianity. You might think it's really close because it uses a lot of the same words, but it's not. We cannot have a separation of the man from the message, because Jesus Christ, God-man made man, *is* the message... you cannot separate the guy from the gospel. You can't separate the person from the preaching.”

► 1:54:29

So to anyone who quietly saw this on Facebook and thought, maybe I'll put out the nativity but hold back baby Jesus, maybe I shouldn't watch *The Chosen*, maybe it's from the devil: “Let those other people's legalistic problems be theirs. You pray for them with sympathy, but you don't need to adopt that.” Put the baby out. And to anyone drifting toward a Christ-concept Christianity, he offered what he called a wonderful invitation to repent. “There is no such thing as a Christless Christianity. This is not Boy Scouts, folks. This is not a Boy Scout troop that happens to have a speech every Sunday morning. We're not a philanthropy club. We're actually kind of culty about this Jesus fellow.” And the stakes are structural, not stylistic: “if you take that out, or you start undermining it, or concern trolling it, you undermine the very foundation of our faith — and at that point, what is this? What is any of this?”

7. He never gave it back

► 1:55:35

He had already prayed and closed — thanking God “for your humility, the fact that you came to embrace humanity in real life,” asking him to “fill our hearts with great faith and joy over the incarnation, and help us see that as a lens through which we see everything else” — when he came back for one more thing, and it was worth the awkward order. Jesus did not shed his humanity at the cross like nasty stuff he couldn’t wait to be rid of. “He was resurrected from the dead a man. He’s a resurrected man. In fact, his physical resurrected body is on the throne in heaven. He’s not going to, like, unhuman.” There is nothing nasty or gross about humanity as such, and no future in the hope of shedding it to become a ghost —
if we share in a death like his, we will certainly share in a resurrection like his, and remain glorified, resurrected humans, as he is.

► 1:56:09

Which let him name the thing plainly, one last time. Strip the movement of its modern packaging and what is left is old: “ancient Bizarro Nestorianism, ancient weird problematizing of the God-man-made-flesh message. It’s just the antichrist stuff.” That diagnosis is severe, and the instruction that follows it is deliberately gentle — even if it’s a preacher you really like, “you know what, just pray for that guy. That’s his issue, that’s not my issue.” Then the last words before the Heart Ministry teams came forward, which are the whole sermon compressed into one sentence: “Thanks be to God that God the Son became real human flesh — and still is, to this day.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Exodus 20:1–3
- Exodus 20:4–6
- Romans 6:14
- Genesis 9:6
- Deuteronomy 4:15–16
- Deuteronomy 12:1–3
- Deuteronomy 12:29–31
- John 5:39
- John 1:14
- 1 John 1:1–3
- Colossians 1:15
- John 14:9
- 2 John 7
- Romans 6:5

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt insisted on finding the why behind the second commandment before arguing about it. Which commands do you obey, or dismiss, without ever having asked why God gave them?
2. God told Israel not to worship him the way the nations worshiped their gods. What have we borrowed from the culture around us and put a Jesus sticker on?
3. “You don’t know what I look like” was true at Horeb and untrue after Bethlehem. What does it change for you that God the Son has a face?
4. Where have you been tempted toward a Christ-concept faith — keeping the meanings and the language while going quiet on whether it actually happened?
5. The nativity scene is theology, not decoration. What is one way you can let the fleshiness of the incarnation shape how you keep Advent this week — at your table, in your house, with your kids?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E49khrNR_4&t=5451s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.