*Jesus, the very thought of Thee*

*With sweetness fills the breast!*

*Yet sweeter far Thy face to see*

*And in Thy presence rest.*

*No voice can sing, no heart can frame,*

*Nor can the memory find,*

*A sweeter sound than Jesus' name,*

*The Savior of mankind.*

*O hope of every contrite heart!*

*O joy of all the meek!*

*To those who fall, how kind Thou art!*

*How good to those who seek!*

*In the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Merry Christmas!

I'll admit that the prospect of the day after Christmas being a Sunday was slightly daunting yesterday as we finished up our time together at worship. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are truly magnificent days in the life of any parish, especially this one. But the 26th, the Feast of St. Stephen, or Boxing Day as we call it on my English mother's side is usually MUCH quieter.

And as I was trying to knit a few last brain cells together to prepare a sermon for this morning, I was joking with some colleagues about some ideas. And as often happens when you toss out a bunch of really bad ideas, one of them might actually become a decent idea. So, this morning I offer you the culmination of that brainstorm: a bit of Christmastide homiletical clickbait. Here are five reasons why the incarnation of the Son of God changes everything.

1) Because the Word became Flesh, we can know what God is like.

God has been interested in relating to humanity ever since He lovingly created us. But if you know the story of the Bible at all, you know that we've had a hard time relating back, or at least relating well. Throughout history, humanity has often wondered about what intelligence exists beyond itself, and we believe that ancient Israel had the best lead on that intelligence because God reached out and called them specifically. And even though God was remarkably clear about what He expects in terms of human response to His goodness, Israel still hard a hard time keeping covenant with God. Which in so many ways lead to misunderstanding what God is like. Then Jesus came. The Second Person of the Trinity, the Word, put on flesh and dwelt among us In Christ, we have the everything we need to know about God: that he loves us, wants to forgive us, expects great things of us, and certainly much more. But the Incarnation shows us what God is like (He's great by the way) and we can spend our whole lives discovering more and more about Him if we pay attention to the person, work, and voice of Jesus Christ.

2) Because the Word became flesh, we can fully appreciate God's pastoral approach.

Just as we can learn to appreciate what God is like by studying and adoring Jesus, we can fully appreciate how it is that God chooses to minister to us. He shows up. Now, Jesus' being among us is not the first time God shows up personally in the Bible. We can read about Eden in Genesis, the tabernacle in Exodus, the Temple in 2 Samuel and beyond and see that God has consistently set forth to hang out with his beloved people. But God's presence among us in Jesus was a presence without caveat or impediment. God was with us in Christ to heal, to serve, to feed, to talk, and grieve. It's a vision of divine partnership and intimacy with humanity that's honestly a little mind-blowing as compared to the religions around Jesus and his neighbors, with distant gods vying for attention via their misadventures rather than their overall benevolence and healing presence. The incarnation is a witness to the fact that God really means to be with us, and really wants to help us draw close to one another and draw close to him.

3) Because the Word became flesh, we can trust that we are loved as images of God.

When you pop the philosophical hood of the Bible, of ancient Hebrew religion, and of Christianity, you find that there is an overall positive regard for things, for matter. Scripture tells us that when God created stuff, which was an overall good thing. Many philosophies of the ancient world disagreed with that, but for those that follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we tend to believe that one of the ways that we know that He is good is because he creates things. And, of course, one of the things He made is us and did so in His image. As his images, human beings are made to represent God to the world as His ambassadors to the rest of creation and meant to offer the rest of creation back to God. And, while each one of us has to come to terms with how we continually mess up what it means as we act in discontinuity with God's original intention for us, the incarnation of Jesus shows us that God has still not given up on that divine image project. Rather, by giving us renewed access to God's presence, Jesus' followers can once again have that Divine image restored. Jesus shows us that God still desires a relationship with his beloved creation and wants us to have a central role in that relationship.

4) Because the Word became flesh, we can enjoy his presence in the sacrament.

Now, in Church teaching terms, we call the Incarnation a mystery. It's one of those things that we can talk a lot about, but we can't say *everything* about because our hearts and minds are just a little too...finite. But by the same divine logic that allows for the infinite to have perfect union with the infinite in the person of Jesus Christ, so too can we enjoy his presence among us by nature of the power of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of the faithful. Now, this is one of those times where I have to be very careful with how I speak so as not to commit some arcane heresy, but know that we can and should commit to meditation and contemplation in response to the fact that the same Jesus who was born, ministered, died, rose to new life, and ascended to the right hand of the Father, that same Jesus comes to be among us at the sacrament at the altar. And while he is present to us spiritually, that does not make his present any less real. I have committed my life to enjoying this mystery, and I pray that you might as well.

5) Finally, because the Word became flesh, we can be instruments of the Word in the World.

All the previous things I've just mentioned have direct implications for our lives if we follow after the incarnate Lord. We can know what God is like, and in knowing that we can love him, obey him, and make his deeds known. If we know that God loves us enough to come be with us in Jesus, part of what makes us his followers is that is how Christians are best known: as a loving presence wherever we go. If Jesus' salvation restores the image of God within us, then we can bear God's image to the world, offering God's love to the world and offering the concerns of the world back to God. If the same Jesus who was born in Nazareth makes a home with us on the altar, we should reverently and joyfully meet him as oft as we can. The work of the Church, together as one, is to work out these implications for the life of the world and for the common good. It's a tough job, but the Word put on flesh to help us do it, and even sent the Holy Ghost to empower us on the way.

Well, there are five reasons why the Incarnation of the Son of God changes everything. Honestly, it was kind of fun to prepare so I hope that was at all helpful to you. As I close, know that because the Word became flesh, I’m delighted and honored to serve you and I look forward to being with you in 2022. This coming week marks the beginning of a brand new calendar year (not to mention the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus). In that same name, I wish you a safe and Happy New Year and I look forward to a 2022 with you in the full enjoyment of the Word made Flesh.

To God, who sent his only begotten Son to be among us, be all Glory. Amen.