



BEAUTIFUL *Savior*

Reflections for the 2022-2023 Advent, Christmas, and New Year Season
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INTRODUCTION

THE BEAUTY OF CHRIST'S BIRTH



wake, you who sleep, rise up from the dead.... Christ who said, I am the Truth, was born of the Virgin. And justice looked down from heaven: because believing in this new-born child, man is justified not by himself but by God.¹

These words by St. Augustine, whose voluminous writings on the Christian faith perhaps are second in influence only to the words of St. Paul, embrace the full wonder of Christmas. Within the Christ Child's holy and humble birth, Augustine believes the very first glimpse of Jesus' beauty is evident.

Today, few would argue with the lyrical assertion that Christmas is the most beautiful time of the year. Ablaze with shining lights and striking red, gold, and evergreen; filled with scents of pine and baking pies; awash in the words and sounds of familiar carols, Christmas is a feast for our senses.

Yet the true beauty of Christmas is not simply what we see, hear, taste, and smell, but rather the presence of the Son of God Incarnate. As John the Evangelist reflected on his personal experience with Jesus Christ, he wrote: "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).

Because "glory" here refers to the visible radiance of the one and only Son of God, we might as well translate one of John's key phrases like this: "we have seen his beauty."

Christmas is beautiful for one simple reason: because Jesus is beautiful.



¹ Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 185



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT *November 27, 2022*

CHRIST IS THE RADIANCE OF GOD

“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.”—Hebrews 1:3

*G*od is beautiful, his creation is beautiful, and people created in his image are beautiful. But the culmination of all beauty—literally, its apotheosis—is the Incarnate Son of God. He is the beauty of God in visible form, “the radiance of the glory of God” (Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus Christ is the fairest revelation in the created universe. He is humanity’s perfect “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), “the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3). Down through the ages, the church thus has celebrated Christ’s unique beauty. The early church father Clement of Alexandria declared, “Our Savior is beautiful to be loved by those who desire true beauty.”²

Similarly, the Eastern Orthodox Saint, Nicodemus, lifted his eyes to heaven and exclaimed, concerning the Christ, “O my God, if Thy creations are so full of beauty, delight and joy, how infinitely more full of beauty, delight and joy are Thou Thyself, Creator of all!”³

It took a long time for Augustine to surrender his mind, heart, and will to Jesus Christ. But after wasting his younger years in idleness and dissolute living, he forsook his sinful ways and dedicated the remainder of his life to following Jesus.

Augustine took this step because he saw in the Son of God such a true and eternal beauty that he was compelled to bow down in worship. The beauty of Jesus changed his life, as it changes the life of anyone who trusts in him.

When in your life have you felt most in touch with God’s radiant glory?

*The culmination of all beauty is
the Incarnate Son of God.*



²Clement of Alexandria, quoted in Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics*, 2nd edition (London: SCM, 2002), 6.

³Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, quoted in Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 102.



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 4, 2022*

BORN BEAUTIFUL

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” —Colossians 1:15

*F*ew times of the year are romanticized more than Christmas. Think of all the television specials with their fireside scenes and predictable plot lines. And how soon stores begin rolling out decorations and the latest must-haves in toys, clothing, and even automobiles.

But it is not only our culture that tends to romanticize Christmas—many churches also romanticize and even sentimentalize the remembrance of the first Christmas. Admittedly, the star that led the Magi to Mary’s child must have been a rare object of celestial beauty. And the angels with their choruses must have been glorious to see and hear. Even stable walls and manger hay sound charming when rendered poetically and set to touching melodies.

Yet there was nothing beautiful about a humble family making a long journey to Bethlehem at the whim of an imperial bureaucracy. Or about

an unexpected pregnancy coming to term in an overcrowded barn. Or about a band of earthy shepherds paying their respects in the middle of the night.

And what about Jesus himself? Many artists render him as a cute baby, a strapping young adult, or a handsome grown man.

But the truth is that the writers of the Gospels steadfastly refuse to describe Jesus’ physical appearance or help us imagine how he looked.

This is remarkable. When we describe people to others they have never met, we often start with their physical characteristics, like height, weight, hair color, skin tone, etc. But the Bible never provides any of that information for Jesus. Despite the countless artistic renderings created since the birth of Jesus 2,000 years ago, we have no idea what Jesus truly looked like in human form.

What are some concrete steps you can take to avoid romanticizing the birth of Jesus?

It is not only our culture that tends to romanticize Christmas—many churches do too.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 11, 2022*

THE SPLENDOR OF EMBODIED HUMANITY

“As one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” —Isaiah 53:3

*T*he one place where the Bible *does* comment on Jesus’ appearance seems to indicate that he was *unattractive*.

In his Song of the Suffering Servant, the prophet Isaiah says that the promised Savior “had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2).

Rather than being sought out for his physical beauty by any earthly expectation, Jesus was rejected and spurned. Writes Isaiah, “As one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3).

It is possible that Isaiah was referencing the disfigurement that Jesus would one day face through torture and crucifixion. Yet the fact remains that the Bible studiously avoids calling attention to our Savior’s physical features.

Of course, in his incarnation, Jesus had the same splendor that all humans have. Each one of us bears the beauty of being fearfully and wonderfully made in God’s likeness. Surely when his mother Mary looked at Jesus through maternal eyes, she declared that the child in her arms was “beautiful.”

There is always something beautiful in our embodied humanity. God the Son took on our flesh, remaining fully divine and yet becoming fully human in sinew and bone.

“Good is the flesh that the Word has become,” writes Brian Wren in a contemporary Christmas carol.

*Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
Good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
Good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
Good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.*⁴

After reflecting on the significance of Jesus’ adoption of human form, how are you prompted to think differently about your body and the bodies of others?

Rather than being sought out for his physical beauty by any earthly expectation, Jesus was rejected and spurned.

⁴Brian Wren, “Good Is the Flesh” (Carol Stream, IL): Hope Publishing, 1989.





FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 18, 2022*

THE BEAUTY OF CHRIST'S HUMILITY

"The LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people." —Isaiah 28:5

*S*o what does make Jesus so beautiful? Why did Isaiah say of the coming Savior that in his day "the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people" (Isaiah 28:5)?

Why did John testify in the opening verses of this Gospel that he had seen the glory of the One and Only? Why do we say that Jesus Christ is beauty incarnate?

Consider, first of all, the beauty of our Lord's humility. The simple fact of his incarnation into human form displays extraordinary condescension. In his very nature, Jesus was and is God. As the Second Person of the Trinity, he is God the Son eternal.

From eternity past, he had lived in the absolute exaltation of his deity, adored by myriad angels, and untouched by any pain or earthly sorrow. All the honor, all

the glory, and all the praise belonged to him.

And yet, even though "he was in the form of God," the Scripture says, he "did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7).

Simply by becoming a human being, the everlasting Son of God performed the most astonishing act of humility the world had ever witnessed. He did not divest himself of his deity when he became a man, but he did relinquish its glories and, in doing so, displayed new dimensions of humble beauty. As beautiful as he had always been in his divinity, paradoxically, by emptying himself, Jesus revealed himself to be even more beautiful.

What acts of humility have reminded you of Christ's condescension?

Simply by becoming a human being, the everlasting Son of God performed the most astonishing act of humility the world had ever witnessed.



CHRISTMAS EVE & DAY *December 24 & 25, 2022*

AT HOME IN THE BODY

“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

The paradox of Christ growing more beautiful through the act of self-emptying inspires in the apostle John a striking response. John declares that when the Word became *flesh*, he “dwelt among us.” The verb being used here is a form of the word *tabernacle*.

This expression explicitly calls to mind the Tabernacle of the Old Testament—the portable sanctuary that the children of Israel made according to the precise instructions that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The Israelites carried their grand tent with them through the wilderness for 40 years before erecting it in the Promised Land (see Exodus 25-31, 35-40; Joshua 10:43, 18:1). This sacred tent of worship, or Tabernacle, was the earthly dwelling place of the living God, symbolizing his presence with his people.

When Jesus was born, God took up residence (or “tabernacled”) with his people in a new way. Through his incarnation, God the Son began—for the first time and forever—to dwell with us bodily.

Pastor and author Sam Allberry points out that Jesus did not just take on a body, but he also *became* a body, which is surely the “highest compliment the human body has ever been paid. God not only thought our bodies up and enjoyed putting several billion of them together; he also made one for himself.”⁵

Allberry comments further that the incarnation was not reversible but permanent, which means that today there is “a human body sitting at the right hand of God the Father at the very center of heaven.”⁶

Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

How might you grow in beauty by modeling Jesus Christ’s act of self-emptying?

*When Jesus was born, God took up residence
(or “tabernacled”) with his people in a new way.*

⁵Sam Allberry, *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 20.

⁶Allberry, 21.





FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY/NEW YEAR'S DAY January 1, 2023

THE INCARNATION AS “IRREVERENT DOCTRINE”

“He was...a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief....” —Isaiah 53:3

The embodiment of the Son of God meant that he would suffer all the indignities of mortality—physical pain, weariness, hunger, thirst, and death. It also meant, however, that he would be able to empathize with our sorrows.

When we understand what the Son of God gave up in order to enter into our humanity, we bear witness to such astonishing humility that we feel compelled to say, “Jesus is beautiful!”

“Once we come into contact with the manger at Bethlehem,” marvels Thomas Dubay, we “cannot entirely escape the ineffable loveliness of the idea of the omnipotent God dwelling in the form of a feeble baby.”⁷

If we sentimentalize the birth of our Savior by transforming it into a romantic scene,

twinkling with ersatz splendor, we might well miss the true beauty of the first Christmas.

The fact is that the Son of God gave up his heavenly glory to experience our fallen humanity. We must keep that contrast sharp if we want to see his humility in all its beauty.

C. S. Lewis went so far as to describe the incarnation as an “irreverent doctrine.” It is irreverent because instead of protecting God the Son from our human troubles, this doctrine shows him entering fully into them. Only a deeply profound humility, Lewis writes, could have “decreed that God should become a baby at a peasant-woman’s breast, and later an arrested field-preacher at the hands of the Roman police.”⁸

Jesus is beautiful in his humility.

When you meditate on the sharp contrast between Christ’s heavenly glory and our fallen humanity, how does your understanding of his profound humility deepen?

The embodiment of the Son of God meant he would suffer all of the indignities of mortality. It also meant that he would be able to empathize with our sorrows.

⁷Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 307.

⁸C. S. Lewis, Introduction to J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (London: Macmillan, 1947).



EPIPHANY OF THE LORD *January 6, 2023*

THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS



“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and...he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”

—Mark 9:2-3

*J*esus is also beautiful in his holiness. To be holy is to be set apart for God. Holiness is strongly associated with Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God. Indeed, holiness inheres within his divine nature. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was set apart for God even from before his birth.

The angel Gabriel said to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Just as the beauty of the Spirit makes Jesus beautiful, so also the holiness of the Spirit makes him holy.

It is not surprising that the word “holy” comes up frequently in the world’s Christmas carols, such as “O Holy Night!” Similarly, in “Silent Night,” our Savior is described as a “holy infant, so tender and mild.”

We do not stop there, however. Jesus was not only born a holy child; he also lived a holy life. As we sing in “Once in Royal David’s City,” another Christmas carol: “With the poor, and mean, and lowly / Lived on earth Our Savior holy.” In a word, Jesus is *holy*, and this is beautiful.

When John said that he and others had seen “the glory of the only Son,” he was referring in part to what he witnessed on the Mount of Transfiguration, when suddenly he saw Jesus radiate with the visible glory of God (Mark 9:2-13). The glory that John witnessed is especially apparent to anyone who looks at the life of Jesus and beholds the beauty of his holiness. When we look at Jesus, we see the holiness of God in all its beauty.

When have you sensed the presence of God’s holiness most powerfully?

*Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was set apart
for God even from before his birth.*



BAPTISM OF THE LORD *January 8, 2023*

THE BEAUTY OF SACRIFICE

“[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” —Matthew 1:21

*I*n the person of Jesus Christ, we see the beauty of humility, the beauty of holiness, and the beauty of *sacrifice*. The Son of God became a man not only to live with us, but also to die for us, “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

From the very beginning, a shadow falls across the pages of the story of the first Christmas as the Gospels foreshadow the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. When John tells us that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), he makes sure to mention the sad and surprising fact that when Jesus came into the world, his own people would not receive him (John 1:11).

Mother Mary is told even more explicitly that her son would be rejected and opposed and that as a sword pierced him, so it would also pierce her soul (Luke 2:35).

Thus God the Son did not come in bodily form simply to look beautiful but *to do something beautiful*.

To do this beautiful thing, he first had to fully enter our humanity because, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, God’s “children share in flesh and blood,” so Jesus “himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

God became man so he could atone for humanity’s sin. This, too, is beautiful—this willing submission, this saving action, this loving sacrifice.

We needed the God-man to show us the beauty of salvation—through his humble incarnation, holy life, sacrificial death, miraculous resurrection, triumphant ascension, and glorious return on the last of all days. Every moment in his saving work is a new display of divine beauty.

As we stand and wonder at the beauty of Jesus Christ, we open our hearts to greater experiences of beauty in the world that God not only made but also entered to redeem, bearing witness to the light of his radiant glory.

As you begin this new year, how can you open your heart to greater experiences of Christ’s humble, holy, sacrificial beauty?

*Thus God the Son did not come in bodily form
simply to look beautiful but to do something beautiful.*





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