

Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church (UCC)  
December 17, 2023

**Christmas in Seven Carols**  
**Part 3: Down to Earth, as a Dove**  
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scriptures: Colossians 1:11-23

**I. Down to Earth**

Our carol for the morning, seems a bit out of place in today's world. Consider its very first verse:

*Down to earth as a dove,  
came to all, holy love;  
Jesus Christ from above  
bringing great salvation,  
meant for every nation.*

Living at a time in human history when we are aware of the fact that the Universe extends billions of light-years in every direction, when a carol speaks of Jesus coming “down to earth ... from above,” we have to wonder which way is “down” and which is “up”? What might appear to be “down to earth” to some might very well be “up to earth” when seen from a different angle!

Spiritual language is, of course, inherently metaphorical – a concept that can befuddle those who interpret biblical texts literally. For instance, the Bible calls Jesus the “Lamb of God,” yet no one believes this means that Jesus had curly white fur and hooves. Even literalists acknowledge the Bible's use of metaphors at times.

Literal interpretations often struggle with metaphors because metaphors carry a multitude of meanings rather than a singular one, making it more difficult to pin down their significance.

During the Christmas season, the metaphor of Jesus as the “Son of God” comes to the forefront. While we recognize that Jesus isn't literally the biological Son of God, this metaphor carries such rich spiritual significance, it cannot be confined to a single interpretation.

Consider the question of your own identity as a son or daughter of your parents. What does being a son or daughter mean to you? Is there one definitive meaning? You could name a hundred or more ways that being a son or daughter is significant without exhausting all the possibilities.

Curiously, we accept the multifaceted meaning of being a child to earthly parents, yet when it comes to Jesus as the Son of God, there is often an insistence on a precise definition, to the point of excluding those whose interpretation differs from that of their faith community.

Over the years, including my time as a minister, my understanding of Jesus as “Son of God” has varied widely, from seeing Jesus as a child of God much like any of us are God's children, to viewing him as God incarnate – and many beliefs in between. My beliefs about the significance

of Christ's death and resurrection have also varied, from seeing his death as a tragic error never intended by God to considering it a preordained atoning sacrifice for our sins – and many beliefs in between.

Interestingly, despite the wide range of my beliefs regarding Jesus's nature and identity, and his death and resurrection over time, his core significance for me has remained the same:

**Jesus demonstrates that we are loved by God beyond our wildest imagination and invites us to reshape our lives in light of this profound truth.**

To me, this is my definition of salvation itself. Salvation is discovering that you, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination and determining to live our lives in response to this discovery. In other words, salvation is not a “get out of Hell free” card, but a form of healing. The root word of “salvation” is, after all, *salve*, which means “to heal.”

What makes this healing understanding truly *saving* is the fact that God's vast love and amazing grace aren't mere wishful thinking. Based on Jesus's life and teachings, and his death and resurrection, we have good reason for believing that God is this loving and gracious. It doesn't matter whether you believe that Jesus was the Son of God or simply an inspired prophet, or whether you believe he was a mere mortal, or God incarnate. If Jesus reveals something true about God – who God is and what God's will and intention is for the world – then we can be assured that no matter who we are, and no matter where our path has taken us, we are all loved beyond our wildest imagination. This is not just true for those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but also for those who reject him.

On what grounds can I claim that God's love is so extravagant that it extends to both believer and non-believer alike?

This claim rests on many grounds, but a good place to start is the Cross. If Jesus reveals the heart of God's heart on the Cross, then it is highly significant that he prays for his own crucifiers, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” If Jesus prays that his own crucifiers are forgiven for rejecting him, then who among us is not loved and saved?

These extraordinary implications were not lost on the apostle Paul. Writing to the church in Colossae, Paul proclaims, “For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell ...” – in other words, we find God's will and intention for the world on full display – “and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven ...” (Colossians 1:19-20). What part of “all things” doesn't include non-believers, or Jesus's own crucifiers – *or you*? For Paul, all things means all things. Which is why Paul does not mention Hell even once in any of his New Testament writings. Of what relevance is Hell if Christ has reconciled all things to God? And when Paul offers proof of his assertion that Christ has reconciled *all things*, he points to the Cross. It's hard to argue with Jesus' prayer of forgiveness if Jesus reveals the heart of God's heart; the fullness of God's will.

Deep down, a great many people believe that, because of something they have done, or left undone, they are outside the circle of God's love and grace. If you are one of these people, I invite you to consider this question: Have you ever done anything worse than crucifying Jesus? If God could love and forgive those who crucified God's own son, then God's love and forgiveness certainly extends to you. You are part of the circle!

When we really let this amazing grace and love sink into our psyche, it helps us let go of our deepest fears. Fear comes in a wide variety of flavors, but our deepest fear is of rejection. Even if we've had loving parents, most of us have had psychological tapes recorded since our childhood that tell us, "You are not good enough." "You are a disappointment." "You are a fraud." "If people knew who you really are, they would reject you." "You are not loveable. You are not even worthy of love."

Yet if Jesus reveals the heart of God's heart, then Jesus smashes these tapes. He smashes these tapes and the condemning voice inside your head by assuring you that you are never beyond God's love and grace – even if you are Christ's own crucifier. You and all of humanity are the very focus of God's love and grace! Therefore, anyone who accepts God's love and grace can joyfully affirm our carol's second verse and its refrain:

*This is love come to light,  
now is fear put to flight.  
God defeats evil's blight;  
giving for our sorrows  
hope of new tomorrows.*

*Refrain: Let us sing, sing, sing,  
Dance and spring, spring, spring,  
Christ is here, Ever near!  
Gloria in excelsis.*

While this love that has "come to light" in Jesus may cause fear to be "put to flight" and evoke singing and springing and the "hope of new tomorrow" *in others*, chances are that you will never accept God's vast love and grace – and the healing it brings – *for yourself* unless you have experienced it firsthand. Are there times in your life where you can look back and affirm that the grace and forgiveness that was even available for Christ's own crucifiers has been made available to you as well?

## **II. Blessed Assurance**

Before May 31, 1981, I dreamt of becoming a solar energy research scientist. I had never before considered becoming a minister. What propelled me into the ministry was a firsthand experience of God's love and grace that was so vast and overwhelming that it became perfectly clear that it includes literally all people, without exception – including me.

I was just finishing my junior year in high school. I had a friend named Becky (not her real name) who was going through a very difficult situation. One day, as she was walking home along a dimly lit road at dusk, someone in a ski mask tried to assault her. Somehow, she managed to struggle free and flee physically unharmed. I say *physically* unharmed. *Emotionally* she struggled quite a lot, especially since it happened in her neighborhood. She had no idea who the perpetrator was.

Adding to her distress, she had only two weeks earlier been visiting her grandfather in the hospital who was undergoing cancer treatment. Her grandfather's immune system had been compromised so the hospital was only allowing close family to visit, and then only if completely healthy.

The morning after Becky visited her grandfather she woke up with a terrible sore throat. A couple days later her grandfather fell ill and died. In Becky's mind, she had killed her grandfather! She was wracked with guilt.

One evening we were at my home talking about all this. I told her that six months earlier I had discovered a powerful way to deal productively with my own struggles. I told her I'd learned to pray. Specifically, I'd learned how to pray in a way that didn't simply offer your laundry list to God and expect everything would come out alright. I had learned to be silent, to simply dwell in God's presence, and let whatever happens happen.

That got us into a deep conversation about God that lasted well into the evening. My mother finally came into the living room and told me it was time to take Becky home. We drove to her house and parked outside still deep in conversation. At one point while Becky was speaking a thought entered my head. It concerned her grandfather and the guilt she was feeling about him. The thought was simple: "Tell Becky, 'It's okay.'"

We weren't talking about her grandfather at the moment so I let the thought go and continued to listen. The thought came back: "Tell Becky 'It's okay.'" I didn't. The thought returned several more times. Each time I pushed it out of my mind and continued listening. The thought became more insistent: "Tell Becky '*It's okay!*'" Finally, I could hardly concentrate on anything but this thought. It had grown so strong I was even picturing her grandfather in my mind saying this over and over. So, I broke in and, feeling rather stupid, said, "Becky, there's something I think I'm supposed to tell you with respect to your grandfather: *It's okay.*"

What happened next defies explanation. In fact, though I have tried at certain times in the last forty-two years to describe it logically, I still can find no better way to describe accurately what happened than to speak in metaphor. Bear in mind that what I'm about to tell you *did not literally happen this way*, but speaking in metaphors gets more to the point than anything I can describe through other means:

It was like a giant explosion suddenly took place. The car filled with the light of ten thousand suns. Time utterly stopped in its tracks and we were filled with the greatest sense of God's presence and love we'd ever experienced. God was right there. In the car! Only, there was no longer any "there" or "car." There wasn't really even an "us." There was only Infinity and infinity was LOVE. This love was fully aware of who we were, aware of everything we'd ever done or left undone, aware of every cell and molecule in our bodies, aware of every breath. The love was so intense that if we were to add up all the love we'd ever experienced in our entire lives and multiplied it a thousand times it would still amount to little more than a tiny sliver of the love we experienced. We felt this love for ourselves, and for all people. *All* people, no matter who they were, loved beyond their wildest imagination. We wept uncontrollably at the majesty of the awareness. At the awe and wonder of it all.

How long did this experience last? I wouldn't have a clue if I had not looked at the clock on the dashboard after the dust settled a bit and the awareness subsided. It was 11:30 pm. The last time I'd noticed the time before the encounter, it was 11:00 pm. If there had been no clock, I wouldn't have been able to tell you even moments after the experience whether it lasted a minute or several hours.

We sat back in our seats, mostly in silence, for the better part of an hour trying to catch our breath. “What on earth just happened?” Becky asked. “I have no idea.” Our heads were spinning. Our hearts were pounding so fast you’d swear we’d just run a marathon.

Eventually, Becky got out of the car and I drove home in a daze. Upon arrival, I went into my parents’ bedroom to tell them I’d returned, as was the custom. They were asleep. I woke up my mother saying, “Mom, I’ve just had an intense spiritual experience with Becky.” She mumbled something incomprehensible and I left the room. A few minutes later there was a knock on my bedroom door. My mother entered asking, “What did you just say?!”

The rest, as they say, is history.

I’ve never been able to forget that evening, and the love and grace God so clearly has for us all. While most people’s experiences of God’s love and grace are more subtle and gradual, I have found that the only advantage my more “bombastic” experience has brought me is that it has allowed me to see with astonishing clarity that those quiet, subtle experiences of God’s love are directly connected to the God of my own experience. The most subtle, gradual experience is just as sacred as my own. Just as important. And just as real. Therefore, just as potentially transformative.

On this level, anyone who has truly received Christ’s revelation into their heart, and found community with others who have done so as well, may joyfully affirm the last line of our carol:

*Christ the Lord comes to feed  
Hungry people in need;  
In the house there is bread:  
Jesus in a stable,  
In the church a table.*

*Let us sing, sing, sing,  
Dance and spring, spring, spring,  
Christ is here, Ever near!  
Gloria in excelsis.*