

The God Who Cries

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of reader]

Merry Christmas. I'd like to share with you in reading according to the Gospel of John [chapter 1 verses 1-14]:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Once again welcome to Artisan Church on this beautiful Christmas Eve night. I love that we have some children with us because what are we celebrating at Christmas but the birth of Jesus. And so I think we all should make an agreement with each other that if we hear a little bit of kid noise - especially if we hear a baby crying - we'll just remind ourselves of Jesus. How's that sound? And the kids have their children's moment coming up at the end of my sermon, so that's something that we can all look forward to. Also, it's a short sermon which everyone will be talking about on the way home; "Wasn't it great that it was so short?" [laughter]. "Gosh, I wish it was Christmas every day!"

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So I wanted to know, what is your family's longest running debate that they have around the Christmas table? We're all going to be having this debate tomorrow. Now we're going to leave politics out of it, but it's like a fun debate that your family has. Can you shout something out to me that your family argues about every year and they never quite figure out?

[indistinct audience voices] [Voice of Pastor Scott]

What? Oh, the Oxford comma. So which of your family members use the Oxford comma and which ones of them are wrong? [laughter].

[Child's voice] Sometimes we fight about when we get to open our presents. [laughter]

[Pastor Scott] Oh, that's a big one - when do we get to open our presents, yes. That debate never gets solved.

[Different child's voice] Sometimes me and Jo, we fight about which stocking is whose.

[Pastor Scott] Well, Jo is the older one, right? So the bigger one is hers. [laughter and applause] Sorry! [laughs] Oh my goodness. So, any other really great debates, like over the greatest quarterback of all time or...?

[Voice in crowd] Reese's Pieces or 'Ree-SEEZ Pie-SEEZ."

[Pastor Scott] Oh my goodness, so who in your family says Reese's Pieces and who in your family is wrong? [laughter] Thank you, thank you. I'm so glad you're here. My wife is right there if you could have a conversation with her sometime tonight, that would be great.

So families are good at arguing, right? We're not always good at concluding our arguments, as evidenced by the fact that they come up year after year after year, right? And the Christian family is no exception. The Christian family started arguing pretty much as soon as it started to exist and it's been arguing ever since in one way or another. But from the earliest days - even in the in the pages of the Bible - in the New Testament in the book of Acts, you see stories of Christians disagreeing with each other. Paul and Barnabas, two of the key leaders in the formation of the early Church, argued about something so bitterly that they went their separate ways and never worked with each other again. We have a fairly vociferous debate in the church about whether new Christians who were not Jewish before had to become Jewish first before they can become Christians, because Christianity, of course, was born out of Judaism. And as the church of the Christian faith matured and grew, there was one topic in the early centuries that was far and away the most commonly debated idea in the church. And that topic was the nature of Jesus. The debate was: Was Jesus truly and fully God, or was Jesus truly

and fully an ordinary human being? Or something in between, because there's a million different versions and sides of this debate. And the truth that the church landed on is one of the most central doctrines of the Christian religion. One of the most important ideas, if you want to understand Christianity, is the answer to this question that they were fighting about in their early days. It also happens to be one of the deepest mysteries of the universe. We don't like that, by the way, do we? We want the answers to reduce the level of mystery in our life. In this case the answer just said: It's a mystery. [soft laughter]

Because the answer to the question: Is Jesus a human being or is Jesus God? Is "yes." As the words of the Nicene Creed say of Jesus: He is God from God. Light from Light, true God from true God. Begotten, not made up, one being with the Father. Through him off things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven: was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. That's how the early church settles the debate. That's how the argument stops being an argument and we get Christian orthodoxy. And listen - it's not just a question of one side winning the debate and booting the other ones out. The reason they landed on this particular view is because this is the particular view that is taught in scripture. You heard it just a second ago in the reading from First John. You heard it earlier in the reading from the book of John, chapter one. You heard earlier from the reading from Hebrews chapter one. Remember the reading from Hebrews? It says, "In these last days God has spoken to us by a son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being and he sustains all things by his powerful word." That sounds like a very divine Jesus to me. John one; "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, all things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being." And then at the very end of that beautiful prologue to John's gospel you hear these words about the Word (Jesus). "The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory." Jesus' divinity and his humanity shine through in these profound words from scripture. And the church reflected that scriptural truth in their early credo statements. Statements that still guide and shape our worship and our understanding of Jesus today, centuries later.

And so of course, once the church solved that argument and they codified it in the Nicene Creed the church has never argued about this idea again. [laughter] No one's ever gotten it wrong. Of course that's not true. Debates like this don't just go away, it's not how they work. It's not how they work, whether it's a mundane detail about how you pronounce a candy or who's the greatest quarterback of all time. We're not going to go there because it's Christmas. We don't want that kind of controversy. And those debates certainly don't go away when it's about the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith. And listen, it's not because someone is out

there trying to start a heresy every five minutes. While that may be true, that's not the reason that we continue to have this debate. The truth is this stuff is deep, and it's complicated, it's hard to grasp. They call it a mystery for a reason. And so we need constant reminders of both aspects of Jesus's nature, and I love how the the Christian calendar is set up to give us that. You have moments like Epiphany. Like the miracles that remind us of Jesus' divinity. And you have moments like Christmas that remind us of Jesus' humanity. Which, I would say, we do kind of get it wrong (and I don't love that phrasing), but we do kind of get it wrong on both sides of that debate. Sometimes we overemphasize one and sometimes you overemphasize the other, but I would say that at least within the church, the more likely error is for us to dehumanize Jesus. We want and prefer the miracle-performing Jesus. The Jesus with his face shining, the Jesus who ascended into heaven like a cloud, because that Jesus makes us feel safe and protected. And rightfully so. But the story of Christmas is the story of God becoming human. Not just human-like, not just taking on the appearance of humanity, but becoming fully human. And the Christmas story gives us a Jesus who feels joy and sorrow and anger and everything in between. It gives us a Jesus who loves us in proximity, from up close — close enough to touch.

We've seen his glory. The Christmas story gives us, ultimately, a Jesus who bleeds and dies. And the reason that Jesus' humanity is so present to us at Christmas is not only because that's where the whole Incarnation begins (that is kind of the start of the part of the story) but also because the God of the universe arrives in our presence as a baby. Think of it. A *baby*. Have you ever seen a baby? [laughter] What a silly way for God to appear. Who would make a list of the things that a baby can't do? A baby can't talk, a baby can't walk, a baby can't feed itself. It can't communicate. Babies make a mess. Babies cry and keep you up at night. This, by the way, is why I have this this long running hangup with the song, "Away in a Manger." I promise that I won't give you the full rant right now. I'll just give you the abbreviated, truncated version of the rant, which is to say when the verse comes around that says [singing], "The cattle are lowing the baby awakes. The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," I don't like that verse at all! It really bothers me because if you have a Jesus who is truly human and that true human being is a baby, guess what? He *cries*. And listen, I'm not going to say you can never sing that song. I'm not going to ruin Christmas. [laughter] But I actually do think that the songs we sing in church matter, and I think the words of those songs matter because they shape us. They shapes us in a way that other things don't. And if the tears of Jesus as a baby are not real, then the tears of Jesus weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus are not real. And his tears at the people of Jerusalem having gone astray are not real. And his tears as he bore the sins of the world on the cross are not real. This is what led one of the early church fathers to say, "What Jesus has not assumed, what he has not taken on for himself, he has not healed, he has not redeemed."

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Our salvation is bound up in the idea that Jesus was fully, completely human. Even at the same time he was fully and completely divine. So at Christmastime as we think of God becoming a baby, let us celebrate the Incarnation, God taking on a human body. Let us celebrate the humanity of Jesus, the “Word made flesh who lived among us.” Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and became truly human. Let us celebrate at Christmas because we worship a God who cries. Amen.

I'm going to ask our kids to come forward for the children's moment. I'm going to sit right here on the platform and you can sit right there on the floor. [children gather and sit] So I have a question. How old are you? [kids shout answers simultaneously]. Did you know that Jesus was exactly your age at one time? Jesus was exactly 8 years old, Jesus was exactly 5 and a half years old, Jesus was exactly 7 and $\frac{3}{4}$ years old. And did you know Jesus was 3 years old once just like you? [addressing girl] What about Susie, how old are you? Two? Was Jesus ever 2 and a half? He was!

You know, we think about Jesus as a little baby in manger and then we think about Jesus as a total grownup. Like really old, like 30. [laughter] But we don't usually think about Jesus as being 7, do we? We don't think about Jesus being 3 years old. Do you know, this is a weird thing but I'm going to say it. Do you know that Jesus had to be potty trained? [laughter] I don't like to think about that but it's true. What is the best are about the 5 and a half years old? [boy answers] Being a kid. [Pastor Scott] Being a kid, yeah. What's something that's hard about being 5 and a half? [various answers] Listening? Do you think Jesus ever had trouble listening? I think so. Kind of special or. Did you know that Jesus was just a kid like you for a long time? He had the same kinds of fun. Maybe he didn't play video games, I'm not saying that, but he played with his friends. He had the same kind of problems and challenges that we have. Did Jesus play board games? [various answers] He might have. But here's the thing, Jesus even though he was just like us, just each one of you kids, he was also just like God. That means that Jesus can show us the very best way to live and to be the kind of person that God wants us to be. Jesus because he was just a kid like you and because he was God, can show you how to be the best 8 year old kid you can be, or the best 5 and a half year old, or 7 and $\frac{3}{4}$ year old that you can be, or 2 year old, or 3 year old. And you know what else? And this is the last thing that I'm going to tell you you all because I want you to hear this because this is what I think about all of you. Because of the fact that Jesus was a kid just like you, that means that all of you remind all of us grownups about a special part of who Jesus is. You remind us about when Jesus was small. Not big like us. So that is one of your jobs in church, to remind all of us grownups that Jesus was once a kid and was a real person. Isn't that neat?

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I'm so glad that you are all here as part of our church to do that job for us. So can I pray and ask God to bless all of you tonight? Is that okay? [all say yes] Alright, can you quiet your voices and your bodies for a minute while I pray for you and then you can go back and sit with your families. Lord Jesus, thank you for these kids who are all an age that you used to be. Thank you for the fact that they show us, a little bit, a special part of who you are and what you were like. I pray that you would bless them this Christmas and always. We pray these things in your name, amen. On your way back to your families can I ask you to do a special thing for the rest of us? I want you to kind of bless our communion table. You can just do that by touching it, there's no magic or anything, but when you touch this table it's going to remind us that you are part of who we are and that Jesus loves us. Can you know your way back to families, just gently touch that table?

Well we are going to celebrate a communion together tonight. You don't have to be a member of Artisan Church. If you're visiting with us, you're welcome. There's no requirement of membership at all. Simply a requirement of you expecting Jesus to be present here with you in this moment and trusting in Jesus and seeking to follow him. So I'm going to invite our band back up as we take communion. And at Artisan we practice intinction, which just means dipping, basically. You can take a piece of the bread dip it in one of the cups and eat it right at the table. Come up to the middle aisles and then go out through the outer aisles. There is a regular bread, gluten free bread, wine, juice and self-contained, sterilized cups if you wish. All of those options are available to you, take whichever one you prefer. As you come, may this be an act unity of the each other Christians around the world who are celebrating the birth of Jesus today. May it be food for your weary souls, and may it be real presence of Jesus the savior, of a God who cries. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com