GOD WITH TEN TOES

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Do you know what a steeplechase is? It's a horse race where the horses run around this track jumping over different kinds of ditches and fences. The biggest one in America is called the Breeder's Cup, and the prize for winning it is $250,000.

If the Christmas Eve service were a steeplechase, all you kids wanting to get home would be the horses, and I would be the last fence between you and your presents. Maybe it's just me, but I always have this vague feeling on Christmas Eve that I'm the final hurdle to overcome before you get to the real prize. You know when you see me up here that the end is getting close…but not quite close enough…

It reminds me of when I was growing up. We always opened presents on Christmas Eve, which I think is harder in some ways than opening them on Christmas morning. At least when you open them in the morning, you get to start as soon as you wake up. The pain is short-lived. But when you open on Christmas Eve, it's a WHOLE DAY of waiting and waiting. Time drags more and more slowly as the day goes on. My parents would always make dinner last FOREVER. As soon as it was over, us kids would be all ready to start shredding paper, when my dad would say something like, "Before we begin, I think it would be a good idea for us to read the Christmas story."

Well what are you going to say to that? All of us would agree that was the right thing to do, and we would reverently nod in agreement that the real gift was Jesus and not all those big, shiny, amazing-looking presents. We would try to think more heavenly thoughts and less earthly ones. But it was really hard to concentrate on the story when all those gifts were whispering, "open me, open me, open me."

So I know what it's like to be a kid waiting for a Christmas Eve service to be over. Maybe even as an adult here tonight, you're thinking, "Mm hmm. Yeah, that's nice," when really you're ready to get home yourself. Mom's thinking about what's left to get done for dinner. Dad's calculating if he still has time on the way home to pick up that present he forgot to get for mom.

Going to church on Christmas Eve can become a tradition to be endured. I know – I've been there. I've sat through enough Christmas services in my life to know EXACTLY what's going on. I'll confess – I've had my share of counting the minutes until the pastor was done and I could zip home for the main event. And I'd have these conflicting

feelings inside. As much as I would want to get home, my conscience was saying something like, "I can't believe you. You're so shallow. You love your gifts more than you love Jesus. All you can think about is the material side of things." Have you ever heard that little voice in your head – the one that says you should be more concerned with thinking about the real meaning of Christmas than opening presents?

This probably won't sound very pastor-like, but what if we flipped things around this year? What would happen if we decided to end the guilt trip and say it's GOOD to be excited about getting home from church tonight? What if we said, "Focus all your attention on those gifts. Enjoy each one thoroughly and shamelessly."

I know – church is supposed to stress that spiritual truth is what's real and lasting. We're not supposed to get caught up in material possessions. We especially hit that hard at Christmas, trying to correct people's view of the holiday. Everyone's thinking about man made gifts when we want them to think about God. So we try to redirect that energy and encourage people to shift priorities. We take something very physical and try to give it some spiritual shape.

But it struck me that the first Christmas was exactly the opposite – it was the spiritual taking a physical shape – not the other way around. God took something hard to grasp and put it in concrete form. Christmas is about a very physical gift – it's about God's Son becoming a baby. God with ten fingers and ten toes. The joy was in the fact that there was a living breathing little body there in the manger. God's love was now visible.

God made us physical beings. He knew we needed physical evidence of the spiritual reality. That's still true today. So I say, instead of trying to downplay the material gifts we give to one another, let's celebrate them and use them as a way to remember that the Christmas gift God gave to the world in Jesus was equally physical and touchable.

Jesus came as a baby – not an idea. One thing that has always amazed me about newborn babies is their instinctive desire for touch. If you just brush your finger against theirs, they will automatically grip it and hold on tight. I remember trying that with each of our kids. I can imagine Joseph sitting there with Mary and Jesus, trying that same experiment himself, and Jesus grabbing on as if to say, "I'm here. Pay attention to me."

Jesus as a physical baby shows us things about God we don't find any other way. We wouldn't get these truths if we just tried to think heavenly thoughts – they only are understandable in light of that baby boy, that very physical gift. Three things stand out. First, God with ten toes is

God made specific.

The Jewish concept of God was that he was Master of the Universe. He created everything. And he's a spiritual being, so he is present everywhere. Solomon captured the idea well:

1 Kings 8:27
But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you.

God is so vast that he's beyond our comprehension. The fact that he's infinite and we're not, the fact that he's immortal and we're not, the fact that he's perfect and we're not – those truths put space between us and him.

But God showed us through Jesus that he is more than universal – he's also specific. He's not just broad – he's also narrow. That's an amazing paradox. It's the last thing we would expect him to be. He focused himself in one place and time.

John 1:1 & 14
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

This intangible spiritual being became very tangible. In the greatest miracle of all, the God who is everywhere poured himself into one tiny spot. The God who can't be seen made himself seeable.

If you know Addison at all, you know he loves to build with Legos. In our family he's considered the resident expert on Legos. He understands them pretty well and has come up with some fantastic creations. So for his birthday, we turned him into a Lego person. Not really – it was just a computer trick. But imagine if we could. He would go from being in charge of the whole Lego bin to being just one of thousands of Legos, while at the same time keeping his identity as Addison.

In essence, that's what God did. Jesus as that baby boy put a human face on God that allowed us to connect with him in a way never before possible.

Without Jesus, we turn God into a general concept. He stays in the invisible, unknowable realm. If God is just a spiritual idea, then that it's easier for us to avoid any personal need to change. When I only think of him as an abstract spiritual concept, I can find a way to rationalize not responding to him. A baby is harder to ignore. When I know there's a God who loved me enough to send his son to earth to die for me, I can't keep pushing him off. When I read about what Jesus did and said on earth, I can't ignore him any longer. He's a specific person who did specific things that impact my specific life.

God is interested in you on a personal level. He cares about your life individually. Jesus' presence on earth shows that the universal God can and does get specific. He's not only the God of the universe – the Bible says he's the God of individual names. He's the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Ed, the God of Roxy, the God of Michele. Jesus makes God specific. Secondly, God with ten toes is

God made small.

Neville Figgis, an Anglican Priest, once wrote,

God is great, the cry of the Moslems, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach men. That God is little, that is the truth which Jesus taught man.

What a shocking thing to think about. One of my favorite stories from the Bible is out of the life of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had just won a big showdown with the prophets of the god Baal. Elijah had prayed, and God had sent fire down from heaven in this spectacular display.

But Queen Jezebel wasn't happy about it, so she planned to kill Elijah. Elijah got scared and depressed, and tried to run away. But God caught up with him, and this is what happened.

1 Kings 19:11-13
The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

All the big things Elijah associated with God – a windstorm, an earthquake, even a fire – turned out to not be how God met him. Elijah's own experience led him to believe God's way of operating and his way of revealing himself was in huge, impressive displays. Instead, God came to him in a gentle whisper. As the old translations put it, he came as a still, small voice.

Karin already spoke tonight of how the Jewish leaders had such different expectations for the Messiah. They were waiting for a powerful political or military leader to come in and set things right. Not a poor, homeless baby. That was too small. That couldn't be God.

In our own lives, we often have similarly misguided concepts of how we want God to speak to us. We want to see something big and dramatic. In her book, Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott wrote:

I was remembering an old story the other day about a man getting drunk at a bar in Alaska. He's telling the bartender how he recently lost whatever faith he'd had after his twin-engine plane crashed in the tundra.

"Yeah," he says bitterly. "I lay there in the wreckage, hour after hour, nearly frozen to death, crying out for God to save me, praying for help with every ounce of my being, but he didn't raise a finger to help. So I'm done with that whole charade."

"But," said the bartender, squinting an eye at him, "you're here. You were saved."

"Yeah, that's right," says the man. "Because finally some Eskimo came along…"

We want God to look and act a certain way in our lives, but he doesn't. God shows up in a variety of packages, many times very small ones. He can work through the little details of your life as much as the huge miracles. God puts all kinds of unimpressive people in our paths, people with seemingly as little to offer as that baby, or maybe an Eskimo. He puts circumstances in our lives as unlikely as that stable. He comes in a whisper, not a whirlwind. And he saves our lives. Finally, God with ten toes shows us

God made vulnerable.

Most of you know John Clum. You can't be at New Day very long without running into him. If you haven't met him, keep a low profile, because when you do, he'll put you to work. John gets things done around here.

Most of you haven't probably met John's son Larry. And if you did meet him, chances are you would never know how seriously sick he was when he was younger. Because Larry's kidneys started failing when he was 13 or 14. John and Roxy watched as their son's conditioned worsened for several years. He was just 21 when doctors said he was going to need a kidney transplant.

When doctors look for a kidney donor, they test six specific antigens for compatibility to help ensure that the body of whoever gets the kidney won't reject it. Lots of family and friends stepped up and said they would be glad to give a kidney for Larry – but they weren't a good match. But when John was tested, he was compatible with Larry on all six tests – a rare, perfect match. John had the kidney his son needed.

Now John is not easily slowed down. He's what you call a workhorse. The man is a machine. He's tough and strong and a guy's guy who keeps going like a bulldog. But when it came to the life of his son, John didn't hesitate for a moment to stop in his tracks and give up his kidney. He didn't just say, "Sorry to hear about your condition son. Good luck with that." He had the answer and he knew it. So he risked being cut open. He risked the pain. He risked wearing those flimsy hospital gowns. He risked not waking up. He risked making the rest of his own life more complicated. He made himself vulnerable, because it was the only way to give Larry what he needed.

That's a powerful demonstration of what God has done for us. He saw our condition and he knew he had the perfect match that we needed that would save our lives. The God we couldn't hurt if we tried chose to let himself be hurt for our sakes. Jesus created a window of hope for us by making himself vulnerable. He risked it all to give us life.

Isaiah 53:5 says this about Jesus:

Isaiah 53:5
He took the punishment, and that made us whole.
Through his bruises we get healed.

For God to become human was to open himself up to hurt and pain and even death. It was the ultimate way to show vulnerability, because it was a gift from the God who has no vulnerabilities, no weaknesses.

It's funny, because we don't like to show that kind of vulnerability back to God. We always want to choose strength, to show that we're tough and we can make it ourselves. It would be like Larry saying, "No thanks, Dad – I'll be okay. Keep the kidney." Jesus coming as a baby says it's good to be vulnerable. We should not be afraid of weakness, because that's exactly where God meets us. Are you weak tonight? Is there hurt and pain or a need you can't overcome? Christ invites you to bring it to him.

Accepting his invitation is as easy as saying, "Jesus, I need you. I believe you came and died for me so I could have life. Please forgive me and take my life in a new direction. Please heal me up and give me hope." That's meeting him in weakness and vulnerability. And when we come to him in that way, he welcomes us with compassion and understanding.

Hebrews 4:15-16
We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all — all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

Tonight or tomorrow morning, you'll go home and unwrap those gifts that have been on your mind. What's always rather shocking is how quickly it's over once it starts. All the hours spent shopping and wrapping and imagining what's under the tree ends in the blink of an eye.

That's how Christmas is – so much anticipation over gifts, and then the moment is gone all too quickly. As much as we can't wait to open the presents, we don't want that time to end. We'd like to stretch out the moment. I think that's because we're wired for something more permanent. Deep down, our souls know there's got to be a gift that offers a longer lasting joy. We were created with a built in need for Jesus to be our most important gift. It takes a lifetime to unwrap the meaning of Jesus, and even then we've still got all of eternity to enjoy him.

So when you're staring at the pile of wrapping paper on the floor, stop and think for a moment about the gift God wrapped up for us in that little baby boy. The gift of knowing the God of the whole universe cares about my particular situation. Have I been thinking about God as just a general concept? Is He specific to me? Has it hit me yet that he came as a real person concerned about my real world?

Where am I looking for Jesus this season? Am I hoping for something big and dramatic? What are my expectations of God? Jesus came as a tiny baby, and he still speaks in a gentle whisper. Can I find him in small and unexpected places?

He's the strong God who came in weakness. He made himself vulnerable for me. Have I made myself vulnerable for him? Am I ready to let him see me for who I am, to come to him with my own brokenness? He already sees you and me.

The God with ten fingers and ten toes is reaching out to you. He can be touched, he can be known, all because Jesus came as such a physical, human gift.