

Christmas Day 2025
Church of the Good Shepherd, Venice, FL
Fr. John Warfel

My childhood Christmas memories center around one person
Since I talk about her a lot, and
As she shows up in my sermons from time to time,
She's no stranger to many of you.
That one person is, of course, my grandmother, Grandma Evelyn

It is impossible for me to sing, *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*-
without thinking about her
There she stands, next to me in church on Christmas Eve,
her voice sliding up and down with the notes,
her soft southern drawl clearly perceptible in the lyrics

In my mind's eye, I kneel next to her at the communion rail,
cradling the host in my cupped hand
as we receive Christmas Communion together.

It wasn't Christmastime until Grandma arrived.
Two days before Christmas Eve,
She would drive from North Carolina to our home in Maryland-
to spend five days with my family,
Never more than five days but never fewer

Evelyn was my grandmother by marriage, not by blood
That didn't matter in the slightest to either one of us
I thought that the sun rose and set on her,
And it was no secret that I was her favorite grandchild as well

Despite our respective ages and positions in life,
We shared a mutuality that amazes me still
Grandma was the first adult not to talk down to me
She was the first grownup to engage me in adult conversation
My opinions truly mattered to her; she took them seriously
Later, she proved to be a safe place to pour out adolescent angst
She was a rock-solid source of unconditional love.

Evelyn had a profound influence on my life-
My values, my respect for tradition, order and propriety,

Even my faith in God.
She's the one who brought me to the Episcopal Church

What's more, she gave great Christmas presents
She shopped at *good* department stores and had an eye for quality
Some of her best presents, however, didn't come from stores.

When I was twelve,
She painted, glazed and fired a gold ceramic Christmas tree just for me
You remember those, right?
Very popular among ceramic classes back in the late 60's and early 70's
Small holes fitted with tiny multicolored plastic ornaments-
illuminated by a single lightbulb inside the tree

This was my first real grown-up Christmas present and to my mind,
It was the height of elegance: *I had arrived*
Although it sat proudly on top of the piano in our living room,
No visitor left our house without knowing that it belonged to Johnny

When I was thirteen, Grandma gave me *this* (hold up photo)
It's a small dresser-top photograph of her, taken in 1908 at age 16
It gives new meaning to the concept, *recycled gift*, because-
My grandfather's handwriting appears on the back

It reads, *Gift from Ida, October 10, 1959* (Ida was Grandma's sister)
The photograph is set in its original hand-carved rosewood frame;
Unquestionably one of my favorite Christmas presents ever.
OK, so much for nostalgia and sentiment
We are here today to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord,
Not to walk down memory lane with your Assisting Priest.
What does the relationship with my grandmother have to do with the Incarnation?

In a word, **Intimacy**.
The Incarnation has to do with intimacy;
The relationship I had (and still have) with my grandmother-
Is one of the purest forms of intimacy I have ever known.

As a child, intimacy seems simple, natural and effortless
As we get older, intimacy becomes challenging, threatening, even intimidating
Intimacy is further complicated by a seemingly exclusive focus on only one type, physical
intimacy
But for Grandma and me, intimacy was the genuine delight we shared,
Whenever we were in each other's company

That's precisely what God wants to share with all of God's creation
God wants to delight in our company as much as God hopes-
we want to delight in God's

So God became **one of us**, God became human
With Mary's full consent and the Flowing Mystery of the Holy Spirit,
God became **intimate** with human birth, human vulnerability and dependency
*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth,
And laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

The birth of the Christ Child shows us the degree to which God is willing-
To experience intimacy with God's own Creation,
With no preferential treatment or protection, even for the Son of God

Nothing to shield Godself from the same risks, the same dangers,
The same vulnerabilities that humans experience
Nothing forced, nothing phony
Nothing, in fact, that could cheapen *real* intimacy between God and us.

Ah, but real intimacy comes with a price – the risk of being hurt.
In the person of Jesus, God got hurt a lot,
A near miss by Herod, a direct strike by Pilate,
Betrayal, rejection, even death itself
The very things, that, from our human perspective,
God could easily have prevented or eluded:
These very things **God willingly took on**.

Why?
So that the intimacy between God and humans could be **genuine**
God is not indifferent to human suffering,
How could God be? God experienced it all firsthand.

Christmas after Christmas, God promises to be born (and reborn) **in us**
This is God's promise, to be a part of us, *throughout the ages*
This is not the hollow promise of a distant, indifferent God.
This is the first fruits of the intimacy God experienced through Jesus Christ,
An intimacy that began with the birth we celebrate today

So who is your Grandma Evelyn?
Who is the one person who always delighted in your company,
Who valued your opinion, who singled you out for special attention?
Who was the first person with whom you experienced intimacy?

If that person is still living, thank her, thank him;
Because wittingly or unwittingly,
She or he taught you something about the nature of God.
He or she took on, made real, **incarnated** God's yearning for intimacy with God's own
Creation

If that person is no longer living, thank him or her as well
As you kneel at the communion rail this morning,
A rail that extends beyond time and includes the Communion of Saints,
To a realm we cannot yet see;
Thank him, thank her for loving you,
And for making God's everlasting intimacy that much closer, that much more real.