

1 Christmas     Dec. 27, 2020  
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**Right Here With Us**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

One of the fun Christmas traditions I look forward to every year is the annual *Doctor Who* holiday television special. These specials are the usual stuff of the popular long running BBC series: time travel, action, adventure, humor. And because it's a holiday special, there is an additional holiday element to the story like The Doctor's take on the Christmas Classic *A Christmas Carol*, the Christmas Armistice of WWI, and visiting Santa Claus at the North Pole. But my favorite *Doctor Who* holiday special is the one that does a beautiful job illustrating the Incarnation, what it means that "God became flesh and dwelt among us," from John's Gospel for this Sunday.

The episode is called *The Husbands of River Song* and features a well-known companion of The Doctor whose name - it's easy to guess- is River Song. Like all things *Doctor Who* her story is long and complex, but long story short she ends up married to The Doctor. It's an unusual marriage because they aren't always together, but whenever they meet their timelines are moving in the opposite direction, which means depending on when they meet up, one of them remembers or knows more about their lives than the other. Usually, it's River who knows more than The Doctor, but In *The Husbands of River Song*, we see a rare occasion when the two meet up for an adventure and it's The Doctor who knows more than River. In fact, she doesn't recognize The Doctor because he had regenerated - a clever plot device that makes it possible for different actors to portray the character and has allowed the program to keep going for over fifty years.

At first River Song not being able to recognize The Doctor is played for laughs. But it also allows The Doctor and the viewers to see a different side of the character River Song. While fans already know River is different from The Doctor, we had assumed when she was on adventures of her own she was out doing some sort of good in the universe. This episode showed us that assumption was wrong. River was in fact up to no good; lying, stealing, plotting murder, manipulating, and selling a stolen gem for ridiculous amounts of money. The Doctor goes along with her, voicing his objections of her behavior and questioning her reasoning along the way. All the time River Song dismisses his comments as irrelevant.

As you might see coming, River's misdeeds end up getting her in trouble, and eventually the people she was trying to con figured out she's married to The Doctor and plot to use her as bait to attract The Doctor and kill him. River tries to fight their intentions and ends up making a passionate speech explaining why the plan won't work. It won't work, she says, because The Doctor does not love her. Her captures scoff, pointing out that she loves him, which she agrees is true. But love, she presses is far to "small and ordinary", as she says, for The Doctor.

"I don't know where he is," River Song says, "he's somewhere doing whatever he wants without a thought for me, and that's fine with me. And if I'm in trouble, he's not stupid enough or sentimental enough to find himself standing in it with me." As she spoke those last few words, River turned and looked at the person beside her, who had been slowly moving toward her, and he smiled and said her usual greeting for him, "Hello, Sweetie."

That's the big reveal. And you can visibly see River Song is startled and deeply moved at the same time. In that moment River Song realized The Doctor was standing right there with her in the very trouble she had gotten herself into and the reason he was there was because he does love her. That little moment is brilliant at showing what the Incarnation is and means.

Although I don't like comparing the character The Doctor to God or Jesus, in this case it is the situation not the characters that illustrate the Incarnation so well. The Incarnation is God with us, even in the midst of troubles we've gotten ourselves into, or troubles that find us. This episode reminds me of the many times people encountered Jesus and did not recognize who he was, and the few who had those moments of awakening when they realized Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah.

I also appreciate how this episode of *Doctor Who* reveals the Incarnation is rooted in love. God is not an impersonal metal monolith that cares nothing for those who give it attention. Neither is God one of the selfish pagan gods who considers love to be sentimental, boring, small, common, stupid, or something beneath god and is therefore off somewhere doing whatever they want without a care for us. In fact, the opposite is true: God is not above love, nor does God consider love to be inferior, small, or common. God is Love. And because God is Love and God loves us, God will always be right here with us, no matter what trouble we've gotten ourselves into.

Nothing will keep God from us: not a pandemic, not changes in traditions, not illness, not even death can separate us from the Love of God in Christ.

After River Song recognized The Doctor, the two of them instantly worked together and got out trouble and of course saved the day. After the adventure, River seemed a little shy around her beloved Doctor, for just as we saw another side to her, she had seen another side of The Doctor. But you can also tell they were closer than they had been before, gentler, and more trusting and vulnerable with each other. The revelation had brought them closer together and strengthened their love for each other. This is the reason for the Incarnation, for us to grow closer to God and strengthen our relationship with God.

Perhaps during a year that has been so full of trouble, what we need most is the reminder not only that the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, but did so out of love for us, with the divine desire to grow closer to us. That can help us enter into a new year with hope, remembering we aren't alone, and we are deeply, radically loved by God, for all time.

Merry Christmas