

17. INCARNATION: DIVINELY HUMAN



FOCUS: The meaning of the incarnation has been debated since the beginning of Christianity.

Although often associated with Jesus alone, the notion of incarnation can be understood most fully when it also includes Jesus' followers, called, like Jesus, to enflesh the Spirit in divinely human ways.

IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR?

"The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

– Thomas Jefferson, 1823

We really don't know the what, where, or how of Jesus' birth. Maybe April? That's when Luke's shepherds would likely have been out on the hillsides. Certainly not on December 25th – that's the birthday of Mithra, patron god of the Roman Legions whose birthday was adopted by Christians some four hundred years later. For Luke, the family lived in Nazareth and traveled to Bethlehem where there was no room at the Inn. Shepherds and angels were in attendance. For Matthew, the family already lived in a house in Bethlehem. Herod, the wise men, and a wandering star played the big parts.

Our earliest witnesses to Jesus' life, Paul and Mark, are evidently unaware of anything miraculous about his birth – in fact, Paul says just the opposite. As Paul introduced himself and his message to the Romans, he described Jesus as having been "made of the seed of David according to the flesh." He mentions no virgin birth or any of the elements most people have come to associate with the Christmas story. To Paul's mind, Jesus was only declared to be the "Son of God" by having been resurrected from the dead (Romans 1:3-4), a decidedly "adoptionist" – and according to later church councils, heretical – interpretation of the data.

The gospel of Mark skips all of Jesus' evidently unremarkable early life and jumps straight to the beginning of his ministry – while John goes the other direction and places Jesus at the beginning of time, participating in the very act of Creation.

So what will it be?

We haven't even begun to consider the multitude of other gospels that didn't "make the cut" into the canon of scripture. Some were left out for theological reasons, some for political, but most were dropped when the church was trying to develop an identity and, in modern terms, "spin" the story of Jesus in the 3rd and 4th centuries. A dip into *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* or *The Infancy Gospel of James* will net the reader strange and wonderful details of Jesus' birth, most of which, while not the "official" story, have nonetheless taken root in our psyches through their representation in historic art, oral tradition – and Christmas cards!

JUST ANOTHER VIRGIN BIRTH

"The two men who contributed most to the Church's thought of the divine meaning of the Christ were Paul and John, who never even distantly allude to the virgin birth."

– Harry Emerson Fosdick in *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?* (1922)

From Roman Emperors to the Buddha to the Greek Adonis to the Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl, virgin and extraordinary births are commonplace in cultures around the world. Be it Zoroaster of Persia or Krishna of India, Mithra, Prometheus, Indra, or Horus born to the virgin Isis, Jesus is in not-so-rare company when it comes to his conception and birth.

[Virgin Birth stories are] "recounted everywhere; and with such striking uniformity of the main contours, that the early Christian missionaries were forced to think that the devil himself must be throwing up mockeries of their teaching wherever they set their hand."

– Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* p. 309

Toward the end of the first century, the regions in which the gospels were developing were undergoing culturally disruptive and often violent change. The year 70 saw the Roman Legion obliterating Jerusalem and its Temple and scattering Jewish refugees throughout the Mediterranean. As the teachings of Jesus spread throughout the Empire and as his credibility came into direct competition with other religious figures, stories developed about his birth that sounded strangely similar to the births of the pagan deities that dominated the known world. The stories of such figures were essentially formulaic:

"...whether Christian or pagan: ancient readers, before they even opened the biography of a hero, could expect to find a story about his divine begetting."

-- Robert J. Miller, *Born Divine, The Births of Jesus & Other Sons of God*, p. 134

By the 90s, various versions of Jesus' miraculous birth were widespread and Matthew and Luke incorporated two of these versions into their gospels.

"The virgin birth story was an honest mistake. Most liberal theologians believe that the author of the Gospel of Matthew (or someone who supplied the writer with source material) scanned an unknown ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. He found what he believed to

be a reference to Jesus' birth. It was in Isaiah 7:14. This has since become a famous passage often recited at Christmas time. He simply copied it into Matthew (1:23) as a method of showing that prophecies in the Hebrew Testament were fulfilled in Jesus' life. As it happens, the Greek translators had made a mistake. When they were translating the Hebrew writings into the Greek Septuagint and similar translations, they converted the Hebrew word almah as the Greek equivalent of our English word for virgin. Almah appears nine other times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In each case it means "young woman." When the scriptures referred to a virgin (and they do over 50 times) they always used the Hebrew word betulah. So, Isaiah appears to have referred to a young woman becoming pregnant (a rather ordinary event)."

– Culver "Bill" Nelson, in LtQ's *Saving Jesus*

Whether it is from the study of comparative religions or a thoughtful understanding of the Judeo/Christian texts themselves, Jesus' birth to a virgin takes its place among the almost countless extraordinary births meant to engender divinity and importance to political and religious figures across time. While unquestioning belief in the historical fact of the virgin birth remains a litmus test for many "true" Christians, this literal interpretation of the notion of incarnation limits the presence of the Spirit to one time, one place, and one unique person.

This claim to Jesus' unique and holy nature has been the focal point of debate and rancor for nearly two thousand years.

MAKING SENSE OF ESSENCE

Foreshadowing elements of Jesus' birth and life, *The Wisdom of Solomon* was but one document circulating in the years prior to Jesus' appearance that likely contributed to his later legend.

"I also am mortal, like everyone else, a descendant of the first-formed child of earth; and in the womb of a mother I was molded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage. And when I was born, I began to breathe the common air, and fell upon the kindred earth; my first sound was a cry, as is true of all. I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. For no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all one entrance into life, and one way out. Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me."

– *Wisdom of Solomon 7:1-7 (NRSV)* late 1st century, B.C.E.

But the story of an unassuming human who called on God and to whom the spirit of wisdom came was not always an impressive sell in the shadow of the pantheon and mystery religions of the day. Yet it was enough for many followers in the early centuries of Christianity: although eventually declared a heretic by

later councils, the 3rd century Bishop of Samosata was not alone in his belief that Jesus was the “Son of God” simply on account of his holy life and good deeds.

Was Jesus simply a man whose remarkable life could only be spoken of in terms of divinity? Was he God incarnate, only pretending to be a human being? Was he something in-between? Did he somehow possess the same or similar “essence” of the Divine? These and other questions of Christology, or the nature of Christ, became the central debate among Christians in the fourth century. The in-fighting became so acrimonious, with gangs of hoodlums fighting on behalf of one bishop or the other in the streets of Alexandria, that Constantine saw it as a threat to his unification of the East and West into the new Roman Empire.

After several failed diplomatic attempts to negotiate an agreement between the bishops, the Emperor called the first ecumenical council to order in Nicea to try to reach consensus on issues of Christology. Meeting in 325, the approximately 300 bishops set to arguing over the essence of divinity – while Constantine called it “a fight over trifling and foolish verbal differences.” At issue was what has come to be called the Arian Controversy. The Arians from the East believed that Jesus was not born divine but made divine in life. Their leader, Arius, was eventually voted down, exiled by Constantine, and his writings burned.

Although the Council of Nicea produced what we now call the “Nicene Creed,” it was not adopted as the official position of the church for over a hundred years. Subsequent councils continued to argue over the definition of incarnation itself, with arguments raging over Jesus’ “nature,” whether he was “begotten or made,” or whether Jesus was of the same or similar “essence” as God.

Today, countless Christians blithely recite the creeds without any sense of their original intent, the manner in which they came into being, or any thought that their original meaning could have ceased to have any relevance to contemporary life. Many Christians simply assume that it is and always has been a fact that Jesus is God – without thinking about any of the theological implications of such an idea for a so-called monotheistic religion.

The humble mortal we call Jesus would likely be horrified at his deification by generations of well-meaning followers. The sage teacher and rabbi who pointed beyond himself to the Kingdom of God is unlikely to have elevated himself to the second member of the Trinity, let alone “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” Yet for many Christians, this is the perplexing nature of incarnation – despite options for more practical interpretations.

INCARNATION FOR THE REST OF US

“The virgin birth story is no longer taken literally. But the fact is that in the life of Jesus we still believe that there was a literal experience of a living God. Maybe that forces you to rethink God and if we can stop thinking of God as a great big parent figure up in the sky – a supernatural being who

is external to life – and begin to think of God as the life power itself, the power of love itself, the “Ground of Being” as Paul Tillich described it; which is always emerging in you and me and which emerged in Jesus of Nazareth in some remarkable kind of way.”

– John Shelby Spong, *Saving Jesus*

17th century English poet, John Donne, tells the story of one man’s search for God. When told that God lived at the top of a mountain at the end of the earth, he makes the journey there and begins to climb. At the same time, God thinks, “What can I do to show my people I love them?” So, God decides to travel down from the mountain and live among the people as one of them. As God goes down the opposite side of the mountain from the man climbing up, they miss one another. At the summit, the man discovers an empty mountaintop. Heartbroken, he concludes that God must not exist.

Despite speculation to the contrary, God doesn’t live on mountaintops, at the ends of the earth, or even in “some heaven, light years away” – God dwells within human beings, the true “essence” of incarnation.

At the heart of Christianity is a Divinity who is incarnational. In some incomprehensible way, the Mystery of God was perceived to be incarnate in Jesus. The Spirit of Life was present in him in a way that made his presence transformational for people. Although Gospel writers tried to explain it with virgin births and Councils tried to define it with formulas and creeds, we are finally left with what Jesus evidently had – the call to make the love of God real in the world.

For John Cobb and other Process Theologians, we are not affected by an external deity manipulating and coercing our lives from on high. Instead, the Divine is expressed indirectly through gentle persuasion. God is “in process” with humanity, constantly changing and evolving with us.

“Through Process thought every event is constituted by other events – and the relationship to God is part of what makes every moment of human experience what it is. It’s not something incidental or external. So, God is incarnate in everything.”

– John Cobb, *Living the Questions*

Each of us is a clumsy mix of good and bad – assumptions, prejudices, actions, and intentions – yet sometimes God is able to have God’s way with us. If there is any truth to the Christmas affirmation, “God is with us,” then the Divine is involved in our affairs, gets dirty with us, and sometimes effects beauty in and through us, because the Spirit is incarnate in us.

While firmly in the “Random Acts of Kindness” category, Sylvia Slaton’s story is nonetheless a story of incarnation. The 63-year-old grandmother of 10 was convicted of obstructing official business. After feeding expired parking meters in

downtown Cincinnati so the parked cars would not be ticketed, she was given a \$500 fine. A life-long Sunday School teacher in her Presbyterian church, she stood up to the city, became a local folk hero, and inspired a generation of guerilla parking meter feeders. Having resolved their differences, when Sylvia died recently, the city honored her with a memorial parking meter.

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger, and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of these, the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.’”

– Matthew 25:37-40

What we *do*, for better or for worse, is the measure of the incarnation in the world. Approaching life incarnationally can have consequences. One needs to be prepared for situations that take risk, that can be messy, that include speaking out or standing up for people; that might even mean making a personal sacrifice for someone else’s sake.

The incarnation is finally not just about Jesus alone, but about us. Wherever we find ourselves, the Mystery of Life dwells within us, not limited to a time or place, but a part of every aspect of our lives.

“Where love and caring are, there is God.”

– Taizé chant

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

As the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke can’t possibly be historical, what is their purpose?

With whom does Jesus share the claim of miraculous birth? Why?

According to Levine, what is Matthew up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

According to Brueggemann, what is Luke up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

DVD Chapter 3:

What are the implications of “doing Christology all over again?”

Spong describes at least five different Biblical explanations of how “God got into Jesus”: Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Explain.

How would re-imaging “God as the life power itself, the power of love itself” change our understanding of incarnation?

DVD Chapter 4:

How does “Process thought” make sense of the incarnation?

What is “doing Christology from below?”

How does Athanasius' thought fit in with the "continuum" suggested by Spong?

DVD Chapter 5:

Explain Towne's understanding of incarnation as "presence."

SPIRITPRACTICE:

"Body Prayer" with Dr. Marcus Borg.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Put on the Christmas pageant, “Matt & Lucy’s Version Births.” A clever musical utilizing all the traditional trappings of a standard children’s Christmas pageant, “Version Births” exposes the performers and the audience to the different birth narratives in Matthew and Luke.

The play opens as Matt & Lucy volunteer to help with the pageant. Little do they know that the Director will give them each a different script and leave them to work out how to put on a play with conflicting story lines, characters, and settings. As the play ends, the Director explains how having two stories gives us an appreciation of the diversity of ways early Christians expressed their understanding of who Jesus was.

“Matt & Lucy’s Version Births” is available at www.livingthequestions.com.

**Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 17’s *Living it Out*:
“Emmanuel” distributed by your facilitator.**