

# *It is Not only that Jesus was God's Son, It is that God's Son is Jesus: The Challenge of Preaching Incarnation*

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*Those who say that the God has begotten a son preach a monstrous falsehood, which the very heavens might crack, the heavens break asunder, and the mountains crumble to dust. It does not become the holy God to beget a son.*  
*The Koran, Chapter 7:8*

Any God who would impregnate a poor, unmarried woman, then send a messenger to tell her that she is “blessed among women,” will stoop to almost anything. That God would do such a thing seems to me, odd. Yet who am I, in my limited, post-Enlightenment imagination, to tell God what God should and should not do in order to get to us?

I recall the student who came to me, distressed that he was “losing my faith.” When I inquired what the faith was that he was losing, he replied, “I have problems with the virgin birth of Jesus.”

I suggested that he stick with Mark for his Bible reading for the rest of the year and see if that helped; perhaps he could read Paul, too.

“But don’t I have to believe in the miraculous birth of Jesus in order to believe in Jesus?” he persisted.

“In one sense, no,” I replied. “Yet in another sense, yes. We ask you to believe in the virginal conception of Jesus and, if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there’s no telling what else we can get you to believe. Come back next week and we’ll try to convince you that the poor are royalty and the rich are in big trouble, that God, not nations, rules the world, and on and on. We start you out with something fairly small, like the virgin birth, then work you up to even more outrageous assertions.”

As Barth said, early on in his *Church Dogmatics*, “the incarnation is inconceivable but it is not absurd.”<sup>1</sup> No pun intended, I am sure.

Well, we preachers are in Year B, Mark mostly, for this year’s Feast of the Incarnation which makes it a bit odd for us since, as we all know, Mark appears to know nothing of Bethlehem. Yet we shall find that Mark does know Incarnation. What Luke names as manger, pregnancy, Mark speaks as an ominous, “Beware, keep alert” (Mk. 13:33, Advent 1), or a wild voice in the wilderness (Mk. 1:1-18, Advent 2), before he allows Luke to pick up incarnational themes in Advent 3 through Christmas. Mark agrees with John 1:14 (Christmas) that, “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” though his announcement of that incarnating advent is preceded by, “Beware.” I propose that this year we preachers take Mark’s peculiar way of doing the incarnational Good News as an interpretive clue to prepare to preach Christmas this year.<sup>2</sup>

The main truth to keep before us, in regard to Incarnation, is not that “God is with us,” but that *God came to us as Jesus*. Of all the ways for God to enflesh, God came

as a Jewish peasant from Nazareth who was murdered by the authorities, not because of the peculiarity of his birth, but for the revolutionary quality of his life. Jesus was violently tortured to death, not because he was a baby conceived out of wedlock but because of what he said and what he did once he grew up. His advent provoked a crisis in our settled intellectual and political arrangements, unmasking the relationship between our cherished notions of what can and can't be and our governmental sanctions about who is and who is not in charge. Luke portrays the political significance of Jesus' advent in such subtle but powerful ways, putting upon the herald angels' lips the very phrasing that had been previously used to praise Caesar. There is nothing subtle about the claims Matthew makes with his report of the massacre of the Jewish babies. And in Mark, Jesus means a crisis from his first utterance, a continual confrontation with the powers-that-be and much blood. In short, in preparing to preach during Advent-Christmas, we preachers are in one of the most politically charged seasons of the church year. Things are getting heated, political, not simply because God came to us in the flesh but because God came to us in Jesus.

So we begin by admitting that there is this link between our Incarnation and politics. Gods and kings tend to go together. Thus I believe that Cicero, in his treatise, *On the Nature of the Gods*, got it right, at least as far as first or twentieth century pagan alternatives go.<sup>3</sup> In Cicero's century or ours, an intelligent person has only three alternatives: One can be a Stoic, believing that, although gods are not separate entities, everything is saturated with the divine. Let us reawaken the divine (whatever that is) within us and dance to the rhythm of the Great Oneness. Or one can be an Epicurean, believing that, if gods exist, they have little interest in us or in our world. The best course for the Epicurean is not to whine about it but rather to get on as best you can enjoying this world as it is. Or one can be like Cicero himself, an academic, that is, a professional skeptic in service to the state. What harm in a pinch of incense or a sacrificed cock? These religious matters are awfully hard to settle, intellectually speaking, so just go along with the cultural conventions, participate in the public rituals and sacrifices, salute the flag, keep in step, because religion helps hold Rome together.

Without Incarnation, without a God who is passionately involved and committed to us and to creation, this is about the best that one can do, religiously speaking. All three alternatives leave the dominant political order unchallenged, even undergirded. Alas, for poor Cicero, all of the beautiful pagan rituals and ceremonies, the auguries and all the rest couldn't keep Rome together. About the time that Cicero was urging his fellow Romans to keep up appearances, even if the gods might be a joke, a baby had been born out in Judea whose people would help dismantle pagan imperialism in just a few centuries. That baby brought with him not simply a way of getting on in the world, but a whole new world, which made his virgin birth and his incarnation so much more troubling than that of Augustus.

All talk of Incarnation must be kept very close to The Word Incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth. If not, Incarnation tends to dribble off into pantheism or vague generalities about the goodness of the world.<sup>4</sup> The trouble began in Chalcedon, with the Definition of Chalcedon having nothing to say about the actual work of the incarnate Christ, in its preoccupation with the hypostatic union, in its eclipsing of the man Jesus with the exalted Christ.<sup>5</sup> The work of Christ becomes a general principle of divine substance rather than a definite revelation of the ways of God with the world.

Calvin noted how curiously the Apostles' Creed omits any reference at all to the

historical life of Jesus, his teaching, or his work. Twice in his *Institutes* (III, 8, 1) he refers to the “incontinence” of the Creed on this point and suggests two explanations for this strange omission. First, the Creed’s “suffered” is an encapsulation of what Jesus endured not only on the cross, but in his whole life. Second, the Creed stresses the obedience of Christ which, again, is a sort of summary of all that Christ did and said. Nice try, Calvin.

Though Calvin’s was an attempt to rectify a real weakness within received orthodoxy on the issue of the Incarnation, the weakness continued. Orthodoxy’s rendering of the Incarnation into a mainly metaphysical claim about the person of Christ accounts for many of our current misunderstandings about the relationship of “the Jesus of History” to the “Christ of Faith.” In turn, this has led to a lamentable neglect of the call of Jesus to us to be disciples, to follow him, to take up his cross, and to actually walk down his narrow way rather than the wide way of the world. The current flood, a vague, mushy, cafeteria-style “spirituality,” is but the latest chapter in this long story of an “incontinent” Doctrine of the Incarnation.

As Barth says flatly, “[God] is not a transcendent being . . . From all eternity [God] has determined to turn to humanity.”<sup>6</sup> Barth’s assertion flies in the face of modernity’s attempts to disembody the Christ from his historical, embodied location. Thus Marcus Borg says of the birth accounts in Matthew and Luke,

I do not see these stories as historical reports but as literary creations. As the latter, they are not history remembered but rather metaphorical narratives using ancient religious imagery to express central truths about Jesus’ significance.<sup>7</sup>

Borg goes on to say that, while there is no way these accounts could be “history,” they are “true” as “history metaphorized.”<sup>8</sup> His squeamishness about the historicity of an occurrence like Jesus’ birth flies in the face of Incarnation. Jesus, as this Jew from Nazareth whose advent disrupted the settled arrangements of the principalities and powers — arrangements referred to in the story as Herod, Bethlehem, and Egypt — was considerably more than a helpful metaphor for expressing, in a poetic way, what we feel about God With Us. It is the very nature of Incarnation to be a disruption of what we call “history,” an unmasking of the alleged fixity of “natural law,” an unmaking of Herod’s definitions of what can and cannot happen in this world. While our Enlightenment heritage teaches us to be suspicious of such seemingly “unnatural” outbreaks, we ought to know enough now, in postmodernity’s critique of Cartesian dualism, to be suspicious of our efforts to detach claims like “God was in Christ” from their place in the tug and pull of real events among people with real bodies.

Modern, Cartesian body-mind dualism is a hard habit to break. From Plato, we received a sense that, in order to be our best, we must be better than our bodies. Yet in the faith of the Incarnation, while we are often more than the significance of our bodies, we are never less than our bodies. There is no soul apart from the body, no Holy Spirit without the Incarnate Son, no resurrection without the body. If Jesus had not taken on flesh, we would not have known who God is, namely embodied. We would not have known where to find God, namely in human history. Even more tragic, we would not have known who we are, namely, those whose bodies, groaning for redemption (Rom. 8:22-23), are being redeemed in Christ, now, here.<sup>9</sup>

From Hegel we received a sense that history only had significance as certain metanarratives that could be distilled from the events of history. Yet I think it odd, knowing what we do about first century ideas, that biblical scholars like Borg would assume that we might move from certain prominent pagan ideas about the virginal conceptions of some of the emperors to the story that Jesus was born of a virgin. One would think it would be a great embarrassment for someone like Matthew or Luke to admit that Jesus was born in a way that sounds so much like the way Augustus got here. Why would Matthew, or his community, invent such a notion that would be so prone to pagan misunderstanding?

I wonder if it is more likely that Matthew is struggling with history, with the body, with Incarnation, with the fleshiness, the historicity of a God who is above neither history nor the body but deep in them. The Incarnation teaches Christians that we ought to resist tendencies to think in terms of metaphor, symbol, archetypes, charming primitive narratives and stick close to the story.

The resurgence of the old Bultmanian notion of the division between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith” among Borg and the Jesus Seminar is evidence that we need a refurbishment of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Perhaps we preachers have an advantage over the biblical historians when it comes to an apprehension of Incarnation. That same dynamic that John names as “Word become flesh,” happens in history, in the Body, on Sunday in preaching. What happened in Bethlehem, according to Luke, is not too different from what happens in Buffalo or Birmingham when the word is preached, when the Word becomes flesh and tabernacles among us in something so fleshly and frail as a sermon. The congregation, the blessed bread and wine, really are the Body of Christ, not as some metaphysical idea, nor as some metaphor, but as congregation, as sermon, as bread and wine. Therefore homiletics, rather than historians, ought to have the last word on these matters.

While Incarnation is more than the gospel accounts of the virginal conception of Jesus, it is not less than these. One of our greatest challenges, in preaching the Incarnation, is the rather fruitless past controversies about the birth stories of Jesus, found only in two of the gospels, and whether or not such a “miracle” could have happened. “Miracle,” in the sense of a divine intrusion that overturns the “laws of nature,” is a category unknown in scripture. The God rendered in the Bible is not a *deus absconditus* who occasionally, as in some sentimental season like Christmas, intervenes. God doesn’t come to the world “from the outside” since the world, in its workings, is God’s. As Christians, we don’t believe in “miracles,” rather we believe in Eucharist, the ordinary food of the church, sign of the real presence where only two or three are gathered in Christ’s name. Such miraculous experiences of divine presence occur because the Scriptures tell us that the God of Israel and the church is passionately engaged in creation and intends to flood the world with presence. They seem “miraculous” to us, not because they are so extraordinary, but because we tend not to pay attention.

One ought, therefore, not to be too surprised that a poet is able to speak Incarnation better than a historian:

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings

Around those tissued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant.

No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare—  
That God was Man in Palestine  
And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.<sup>10</sup>

Irenaeus responded to the fashionable gnosticism of the second century by stressing the Incarnate Word's place in the whole sweep of the work of God. Irenaeus noted that God was only doing in creation, in the formation of humanity, in the incarnation of Jesus, in the configuration of the church, in the institution of the sacraments, in the resurrection of the body, the same sort of thing God was working in Mary's womb.<sup>11</sup> Or as Aquinas exuberantly puts it:

Among divine works...nothing can be thought of which is more marvelous than this divine accomplishment: that the true God, the Son of God, should become true man. And because among them all it is most marvelous, it follows that toward faith in this particular marvel all other miracles are ordered, since "that which is greatest in any genus seems to be the cause of the others."<sup>12</sup>

Incarnation must be set in the context of redemption, atonement. When, in the contemporary church, Christmas gradually supercedes Easter as the pinnacle of the church's year, we have not only a liturgical, but also a theological problem. God's glory is hanging on a cross rather than lying in a manger. As Paul put it so poetically, Jesus did not exploit his divinity (Phil. 2:6) but "took the form of a servant," thus revealing who God really is. God has a human face, Jesus. Incarnation is an affirmation that Jesus is the great consummating chapter in the story of how God will stoop at nothing to have a family.<sup>13</sup>

So when Barth discusses Incarnation, he does so in the context of his Doctrine of Reconciliation, and he does so not by referring to Luke's account of the Nativity but rather to Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. The Incarnation is a story about, "the Way of the Son of God into the Far Country."<sup>14</sup> In so doing Barth reminds us that the Incarnation is an aspect of Reconciliation, something not of a different order than what Jesus was doing in parables like the Prodigal Son.

One hates to generalize, but in my experience, those who most often get this matter wrong, allowing Incarnation to degenerate into some vague doctrine of the goodness of Creation, tend to be Anglicans. On the other hand, few preach this link between Incarnation and Redemption better than Lutherans. Here is Carl Braaten, in a Christmas sermon, speaking of this mystery:

Jesus gave us a new and paradoxical definition of God, a definition of the

humility of God. Many people were offended. They wanted a God of glory, not entering the world at the bottom, not from a despised place like Nazareth in Galilee, but he must come in from the top. He must be properly introduced, by the right people, and with the appropriate protocol. But instead the people got the Man from Nazareth, and he was only prepared to give them a message of the humility of God, of the identification of God with the people and things that don't count for very much in this world. He carried his message of God to the extreme, driving the humility of God all the way to the cross.<sup>15</sup>

Or take it from another great Lutheran preacher,

What is the glory of God? The majesty that had nowhere to lay its head; the grandeur that was meek and lowly; the beauty that had neither form nor comeliness that anyone should desire him; the splendor of a lonely Wanderer, weary and footsore, with nails through his hands and feet....I have found in and through him all the God I want. Nothing less than that. All that I know of God, I do not say that I have learned it from him; I say that I have seen it in him. And when I celebrate the day of his birth, I celebrate the day when God made himself so manifest that [people] have not been able to get away from him.<sup>16</sup>

As Stanley Hauerwas, communitarian that he is, puts it, "Our God is not some generalized spirit, but a fleshy God whose body is the Jews."<sup>17</sup> The real "proof" of Incarnation, that God was in Christ reconciling the world, occurs this Sunday as you ascend into the pulpit, as you preach Christ as the Word made flesh, as you claim that God has come out to meet us in Christ, as the congregation meets Christ in your preached word, in bread and wine.

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev. 3:20).

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-77), I/2, 160.

<sup>2</sup> For my treatment of this year's lections see William H. Willimon, *Advent/Christmas: Proclamation 5, Series B* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress) 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, Intro., P. G. Walsh, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (Continuum, 1999) tends to conflate what she calls "sacramental moments" with the sacraments. She has too much to say about the blessedness of the bodies of women and men and too little to say about the blessed Body of Christ. The formative, inculcative, shaping and locating efficacy of the sacraments are lost in a vague sense that every moment, every experience can be a potential epiphany.

The Incarnation is about something else again. At first I thought Ross too extravagant in her claim that our bodies, sexuality, washing the clothes, could all be "sacramental moments." Then I realized that her sacramental theology was not nearly extravagant enough. The sacraments arise out of human experience, yes, but they also shape, form, and name human experience on the basis of God having come to us as a Jew named Jesus. Incarnation is not that God has infused the world and our experience with presence, it is that God became flesh in a Jew from Nazareth and in so doing, taught us to distrust what we had previously thought about the world and our experience.

- <sup>5</sup> George S. Hendry, *The Gospel of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958).
- <sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 547.
- <sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 179.
- <sup>8</sup> Borg and Wright, 182.
- <sup>9</sup> Thus Vatican II could assert that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of [humanity] take on light.” *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, in ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), 220. So the early fathers like Gregory of Nyssa stressed that we do not move from our humanity toward Christ, but rather the incarnate Christ reveals our humanity. We must move, not in Nieburhrian fashion from some alleged “human predicament” toward some alleged divine solution, rather we move from the cure to the dilemma, from the saving action of Christ back to a fresh revelation of our situation. We would not have known who we are, had not, in the Incarnation, God revealed who God is.
- <sup>10</sup> John Betjeman, “Christmas,” *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* (London: Murray, 1954), 12.
- <sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright stresses Incarnation as what one might expect of God based upon God’s dealings with Israel. “That the divine Word should have been made flesh is a sheer act of God’s grace, but retrospectively we may find it at least congruous with the corporeal forms through which God spoke according to the Old Testament.” *For Us and Our Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 9.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles O’Neil (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 147.
- <sup>13</sup> I hope that N.T. Wright is right in his demonstration of the “Jewishness” of the Incarnation, basing his argument upon Paul, particularly Philippians 2 paired with Jewish messianic expectations. A God who would be so intimately associated with Israel is just the sort of God who might become intimate with Mary. See N. T. Wright, *What Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 68-69.
- <sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 21-25.
- <sup>15</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Stewards of the Mysteries*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 27-28.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Scherer, *Love is a Spendthrift*, (New York: Harper, 1961), 14, 17.
- <sup>17</sup> *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 37.