

Preaching the Scandal and the Glory of the Incarnation

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Given the bland sentimentality that attends many of our Christmas services—complete with shepherds, magi, and winsome babies, not to mention Santa and his reindeer!—it may come as a surprise to many preachers that the doctrine of the Incarnation, which the festival of Christmas celebrates, once occasioned significant controversy in the Church. Today the Incarnation seems about as scandalous as fruitcake, but in the fourth and fifth centuries, no issue more divided Christians than the assertion that in the babe and then man, Jesus of Nazareth, almighty God had joined God's own self to frail and fickle human flesh.

By probing three early objections to the Incarnation—and the responses those objections engendered—we can better understand its startling assertions about the scandalous lengths to which God will go to redeem us. In this way, we may find assistance in proclaiming the mystery of the God-made-flesh at Christmastime and throughout the year.

The Carnal God

At the root of the word "Incarnation" stands the Latin *carno*, "flesh" or "meat"—think of the Spanish *chile con carne*, "spicy stew with meat." From this root we get the English words *carnal* "of the flesh," *carnivorous* "meat-eating," *carnage* "slaughter of flesh," and even *carnation*, "the color of flesh." Hence, the Incarnation speaks of the "carnal God," the God who is *enfleshed* in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; literally, if somewhat crassly, God *con carne*, "God with meat on."

It was precisely this connection between the Lord God Almighty and human flesh in all of its physicality and sensuousness that was one of the chief offenses of the Incarnation to many early believers, including Marcion, a second century shipbuilder and once-prominent member of the church at Rome. A contemporary of the Gnostics, Marcion shared with them a radically dualistic worldview that distinguished between a perfectly good God and a thoroughly fallen and evil creation. He therefore asserted that Jesus, as the Divine Logos, would have nothing to do with corruptible human flesh and only appeared to be human but was not actually subject to physical birth, suffering, or death.

But what Marcion believed to be a defense of God's perfect goodness, Tertullian of Carthage perceived as a threat to the gospel itself. Tertullian, himself an ascetic who was tremendously skeptical of the weakness of human flesh, nevertheless vigorously challenged Marcion's charge that the Incarnation was beneath God's dignity. "Come, then," Tertullian writes in his treatise "On the Flesh of Christ,"

Start with the birth itself, the object of aversion, and run through your catalogue: the filth of the generative seeds within the womb, of the bodily fluid and blood; the loathsome, curdled lump of flesh which has to be fed for nine months off this same muck. Describe the womb – expanding daily,

heavy, troubled, uneasy even in sleep, torn between the impulses of fastidious distaste and those of excessive hunger....

“Undoubtedly you are also horrified at the infant,” he continues, sparing nothing, “the infant which has been brought into the world together with its after birth.” Interestingly, as Tertullian rants on, it becomes increasingly easier to sympathize with Marcion. After all, this whole thing does seem a bit beneath God, a bit much to believe that God, creator and sustainer of the cosmos, would so soil God’s own self by being joined to the creation in so carnal a manner.

It is to this very point, however, that Tertullian responds. “You repudiate such veneration of nature, do you...?” he asks, all but rearing up to point a long, bony finger at Marcion, “but how were *you* born?”¹

With this one question, Tertullian makes his case: how else, indeed, were we born, but in this same messy and mucky way? And how and where else do we live, but in a chaotic world, filled to the brim with pain and disease, disappointment and sorrow? Here, according to Tertullian, is the tremendous significance of the Incarnation, as it boldly asserts that it is to precisely this world that the Lord of glory came. It is into precisely this life that God has so thoroughly thrust God’s own self, grasping tenaciously onto us and our lives and promising never to let go.

At the center of Tertullian’s account of the Incarnation stands the nearly unfathomable confession that Almighty God shed all glory and power so as to be *with* us and *for* us. It is the promise that in Jesus Christ God took on our lot and our life so that we might live with God now and forever. Here, in the Incarnation, we encounter a God who can sympathize with all that we will endure—the ups and downs, hopes and fears, triumphs and tragedies that are part and parcel of life in this world—simply because God has experienced them firsthand in Jesus (see Heb. 4:14-16). Here we discover a God who will not forsake God’s wayward creation but rather is determined to redeem that creation at any cost. Here we meet a God we can trust to accompany us wherever we may go. Here, in short, we find a God worthy of adoration, obedience, and proclamation.

Preachers captivated by this dimension of the Incarnation will emphasize in their preaching two main insights. First, they will proclaim that God *understands* us because God has been one of us. This is the God to whom we can turn with any distress, any fear, any complaint without shame or fear of rejection.² Second, preachers may stress the nearly incomprehensible lengths to which God went in order to redeem us. In response to human sin and failure, God neither withdraws, leaving us to our own devices, nor overcomes our rebellion by violence, conquering us through divine power. Rather, God commits God’s own self to us, taking on our lot and our life. These two preaching tangents come together in the common confession that in the God-man, Jesus Christ, we behold the startling promise that God both *knows* us and *loves* us...no matter what!

The Eloquent God

Near the end of his poetic introduction to his gospel, St. John exposes one of the more troubling aspects about our life in this world, writing, “No one has seen God” (John 1:18). Few, if any, of us need much convincing as to the veracity of the Fourth Evangelist’s declaration. When beset by tragedy or suffering, despair or illness, major

setback or disappointment, it can be difficult, and at times impossible, to perceive God at work in our lives. At these times, more than ever, we crave some tangible glimpse of God's presence and power. Yet all too often at just these times—more than ever!—God seems distant, remote, inaccessible; and John's stark confession rings chillingly true: "no one has ever seen God."

Fortunately, St. John's negative affirmation about God's elusiveness is not his final word. Instead, it serves as the necessary backdrop against which we can appreciate the ringing promise that permeates his gospel: "It is God the only son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

Here we find another aspect of the Incarnation worthy of our attention: because we cannot perceive God, God becomes in Christ tangible, physical, and visible. If the first dimension of the Incarnation we explored above dealt with God's ability to *understand us*, this second one involves God's commitment *to be understandable to us*. This is what John Calvin called God's "condescension," God's decision to leave heavenly glory behind in order to come to us as one of us that we might both see and hear God's word of mercy and grace and find hope, faith, and courage.³

John's confession that in Jesus God comes to us most clearly and fully, takes dramatic shape in his use of the Greek term *logos*—"word," also "divine reason"—to describe Jesus. The first words of his hymn, "In the beginning was the Word," clearly call to mind the opening of Genesis and the creative power of God's speech. In the fourteenth verse, John presses this image to the limit by declaring that "the Word became flesh." In this hallmark verse of the Incarnation, John asserts that the invisible God becomes visible by taking on human flesh in order to speak a clear and compelling Word to us.

The Reformers reflected this conviction in their description of God as the *Deus loquens*, literally, the speaking God. Certainly, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews confesses, God has spoken—and still speaks!—to us in "many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1). Yet just as certainly, and as the second half of the verse from Hebrews implies, in Jesus we receive God's most definitive word. Noting the connection between the Latin term employed by the Reformers and our own word, "eloquence," we might therefore describe Jesus as God's most eloquent word.

But we can trust this word only if it is, indeed, God's word; hence the import of a second controversy around the Incarnation, this time involving Arius and Athanasius, both leaders of the church in Alexandria.

If Marcion wanted to protect the Church's belief in God's goodness, Arius of Alexandria sought to defend its historical monotheism, the confession that there is only one God. So early in the fourth century, Arius began teaching that Jesus was himself created, standing somewhere between mortals and God, and that therefore, there was "a time" when the Son "was not." Only by describing Jesus as some kind of angelic, semi-divine mediator, Arius argued, could Christianity avoid proclaiming two deities and retain its fundamental belief in one God.

Athanasius, however, perceived that if the Son were "created" at some point in time, then there might very well be another time when he would be "uncreated," or cease to exist. In this case, nothing guaranteed Jesus' word and promise about God's true character. If God's incarnate, visible Word in Jesus Christ is at peril, Athanasius contended, then so also is the comfort and salvation that Word promises. He therefore argued ferociously for the Incarnation's assertion that the fleshly word we see and hear

in Jesus is also the divine, uncreated *logos* of God.

Nearly a century after his death, and after much turbulence, intrigue, negotiation, and even treachery, Athanasius' views ultimately prevailed at the Council of Chalcedon, and with it the Incarnation's promise that God has spoken of God's great love for the world most clearly, reliably, and definitively in Jesus the Christ, God's Word made visible. As John Chrysostom proclaims of Jesus in a fifth century Christmas sermon,

[The Son of God] became flesh. He did not become God. He was God. Wherefore he became flesh, so that he whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger, so that he, by whom all things are nourished, may receive an infant's food from his virgin mother. So, the father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in the virginal arms, that the magi may more easily see him.⁴

Preachers seeking to proclaim this dimension of the Incarnation may take their cue from St. John and first admit that glimpses of God's presence and work in the world can seem frustratingly elusive. Only by first honoring the struggle of many listeners to believe in our frenetic, post-Christian, postmodern world can preachers then point their hearers to the form of the babe lying in a manger—and the man hanging on the cross that babe will grow to be—to see and hear God and God's love for us expressed most eloquently.

The Vulnerable God

The final objection to the Incarnation meriting our attention is one of the oldest: God, to be God, must be unchanging, implacable, impassive. To Stoics, Gnostics, and Platonists, God was immaterial and neither could nor would compromise God's integrity by interacting with corruptible, finite matter. Hence, according to Aristotle, God is the "Unmoved Mover."

Yet the Incarnation counters Greek notions of a dispassionate God with the confession that God joins God's own self to human flesh and intervenes personally in human history. In so doing, God becomes not only passionately involved in human affairs but also tremendously vulnerable. This is perhaps most obvious in the cross that awaits the child born at Bethlehem. In short, by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, God becomes vulnerable to all facets of human life, including suffering and death.

But if the Incarnation testifies to God's vulnerability through its portrayal of Jesus, the Son obedient unto death, it also witnesses to God's vulnerability through its confession that in Jesus we perceive God to be a loving parent. As Martin Luther regularly contended, Jesus reveals the "fatherly heart" of God.⁵ That is, in light of the Son who comes to die that we may have life, the inscrutable God of the heavens is revealed to be a loving parent, desperate for all of God's children to know God's love.

When you think about it, this is a startling confession. Few persons are more vulnerable than parents. At the birth of their children, parents become, quite suddenly, captive to fate and hostage to destiny, as so much of the good they desire for their children, and so much of the evil and suffering they seek to avoid, is beyond their control. For this reason, to confess that in the Incarnation God is revealed to be a loving parent witnesses to the extreme sacrifice God makes in sending the Son. This is, after all, the adoring parent who announces at Jesus' baptism, "You are my Son. With you

I am well pleased.” To watch, then, as this child, wondrous and beloved in the eyes of his parent, is mistreated, rejected, beaten, and crucified is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine.

God, the Incarnation testifies, puts God’s own self as a loving parent at extreme risk for the sake of the world. Perhaps even more amazingly, we confess that in our own baptism God continues to do so, as God commits God’s own self to us and our wellbeing, and so again is put at risk, as we, too, are wondrous and beloved in God’s eyes!

Preachers aiming to explore this aspect of the Incarnation may move in at least two directions. First, they may contrast our notions of divine strength and power with the picture of extreme vulnerability the Incarnation reveals. Such a message may surprise many hearers who have inherited notions of a stern God and make it far easier for them to identify with, and approach, the God we meet in Jesus. Second, preachers will profit by stressing our status as children of God (see Rom. 8:14-17) and the startlingly audacious promise that God is vulnerable to us. God the Father’s decision to send Jesus the Son into the world assures us of God’s tremendous parental love for us. Both of these trajectories again emphasize the depths of God’s love for us, as the Incarnation reveals above all else God’s unyielding commitment to us and the dramatic, even startling lengths to which this commitment leads God to go on our behalf.

Emmanuel

In the face of all the cultural expectations surrounding Christmas, preaching on the Incarnation can be challenging. But attending briefly to some of the controversies that once surrounded the doctrine helps to reveal its continued existential and homiletical import, as they testify to a God who wants desperately to be in relationship with all God’s children.

In this light, the task for preachers at Christmastime is not to warn us about the ills of too many presents or Santa Claus. It is not to remind us of “the reason for the season” or to scold us for not coming to church more frequently. The task for preachers at Christmas is far more simple and joyous: to give voice to the scandalous glory and glorious scandal of God’s tenacious, awe-inspiring love for us and all the world. This is the love made manifest in the birth of a helpless babe so long ago, a love that continues to promise that in Jesus Christ God has come to be with us and for us now and forever. The sermon that proclaims this message will find an appreciative hearing at Christmastime and throughout the year.

Notes

¹Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” in *The Christological Controversy*, trans. and ed. Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 67-68.

²It is, perhaps, precisely this trust in God’s capacity to meet us where we are that emboldened the Psalmists to give voice to emotions – anger, fear, regret, thirst for vengeance – that we would be more inclined to banish from our places of worship.

³For an illuminating discussion of this aspect of Calvin’s theology, see Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Donald J. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 21-42.

⁴Quoted in *A Christmas Sourcebook* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1984), 155.

⁵See, for instance, Luther’s “Explanation to the Apostles’ Creed” in *The Large Catechism, The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 419.