

The Incarnation: A Progressive Understanding

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26-38
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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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.

That was a quote not from some modern progressive religious scholar, but from an 1823 remark by that great American amateur theologian, and third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Nearly 200 years later, Jefferson's prediction of seeing the revered birth narratives in the Bible not as literal historical fact has taken hold within the minds of most progressive Christians.

Disclaimer: before I go any further, let me state right from the start of this sermon that this fits into that category that I like to call, "For Your Consideration." What I plan to share with you today is considered heresy by orthodox theological and doctrinal gatekeepers. It has already been shared, however, with those of you who attended the adult church school class a couple of years ago using the curriculum entitled, ***Living the Questions: An Introduction to Progressive Christianity***; and with those of you who are attending the current church school class which is using curriculum by the same publisher called, ***Saving Jesus Redux***.

As a bit of a refresher, let me begin with a brief presentation of the traditional and orthodox understanding of the **doctrine of the Incarnation**. For that purpose, I will be quoting from a paper just released by a group called **The Fellowship of Presbyterians**. This group is considering whether to split from the mainline PCUSA denomination and form an entirely new Reformed body here in the United States. Just over a week ago they released a paper entitled, *Draft of The Theology of The Fellowship of Presbyterians and The New Reformed Body*.

At this point, this loose consortium of folks is comprised mostly of pastors and members of large, conservative Presbyterian congregations throughout the country. They will meet in Orlando in January 2012 to vote on whether to pursue the formation of a new denomination. This past summer's passage of Amendment 10-A, allowing qualified LGBT persons of faith to be ordained in the PCUSA, was evidently the last straw.

A section of their paper is entitled, "Essential Tenets." They state, "We recognize that some truths of the gospel are central and foundational." I personally believe that these are simply codes words for 'fundamental.' **There are indeed many parallels with**

the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America back in the early 1920s and 1930s.

For those who hope to be ordained in this new denomination, if it indeed forms, they will be held accountable to holding fast and true to these classic doctrinal positions, which so indeed find expression in our mostly ancient creeds and confessions. After a section on the relatively literal interpretation of Scripture as the sole authority for our confessions (as opposed to what progressives do by filtering them through the historical lens in which they were written), and a statement on the nature of the Trinity, they address the Incarnation.

“Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human...he is born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit.” It appears that if this group breaks from the PCUSA to form a new denomination, they will revert back to insisting on a literal understanding of the virgin birth, a topic that was pretty much dismissed as a litmus test for ordination in our denomination almost 100 years ago.

Progressives would partially agree, however, with elements of their statement, “Jesus Christ is indeed Immanuel, God-with-us, not one who used to be God, nor one who has merely been sent from God. Rather in his coming we have seen God’s glory, for Jesus is the exact imprint of God’s very being and in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

It’s clear that they hold to the ancient orthodox formula that Jesus was not only different in degree with other human beings, but also different in kind. Progressive scholars argue, however, that being different in kind, in substance itself, means Jesus *can’t* really then be fully human.

It’s not unfair to say that many traditional Presbyterians still see the birth narrative, as presented in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, as literal history – as events that happened exactly as they are presented, and not a metaphorical stories. Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, a leader in the progressive Christian movement, has this to say about the birth narratives:

Not a biblical theologian of world rank, Catholic or Protestant, still treats the birth stories of Matthew and Luke as if they are history.

Stars don’t wander through the sky so slowly that wise men can follow. Fetuses in Elizabeth’s womb don’t leap to salute fetuses in Mary’s womb to prove that Jesus was great than John the Baptist. Shepherds don’t find a baby with no more clues than he is wrapped with swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

But, these accounts are in touch with a powerful and profound truth... In the life of Jesus we still believe that there was a literal experience of a living God.

That may force us 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.

Saying that, **progressive Christians still maintain that, “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 the flesh – of 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 church 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.** (*LtQ 2.0* printed curriculum.)

Spong is among those who believe that we need to do Christology all over again. Historically, understanding Jesus began with the understanding of God who was 'up there in the sky.' The primary question, therefore, was: How did God get down here to earth – into this life? More specifically, How did God get into Jesus?

You may not be aware that there is no one consensus on this even in the New Testament itself. Spong describes at least five different explanations of how God got into Jesus. According to the Apostle Paul, who makes no mention of Jesus' birth, and whose writings are the oldest in the New Testament, it appears to have happened at the resurrection. For the gospel writer Mark, who didn't even write a birth narrative, it happened at Jesus' baptism. In Matthew and Luke, written a decade or so after Mark, and despite the fact that their birth narratives differ greatly from one another, it happened at Jesus' conception. Writing toward the end of the 1st century, the Fourth Gospel, John, backs it up to the very beginning of creation itself.

Spong believes that ALL these explanations can actually be dismissed, because ultimately there is no way to explain the eternal. He suggests that all these authors were simply trying to express how God was *present* in this Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, **all explanations of “How God got into Jesus” can be dismissed except for the experience of God in the life in this Jesus.** He reminds us that virgin birth stories were a dime a dozen back in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Our task, then, as progressives, is not to insist on a literal interpretation of the scriptures or to absolutize ancient church creeds and doctrines, but rather to open people up to the understanding of an experience of God. Unfortunately, however, many would rather argue doctrine instead of following the call of Jesus to follow him. A heated debate over the literalness of the virgin birth, for example, may be stimulating, but ultimately it is a distraction from Jesus message.

Jesus Seminar scholar Jon Dominic Crossan states that the birth narratives that developed around Jesus were simply meant to rival the proclaimed 'divinity' of other leaders in the ancient world. **Crossan suggests that these stories were meant to compare Jesus with Caesar, who was declared to be Lord and Savior of the Roman Empire. In order to contrast this imperial theology, Crossan says that followers of Jesus presented an alternative – a kingdom theology that declared that Jesus, not Caesar, is “our best guess of what God looks like in sandals.”**

So what the incarnation ultimately boils down to is more of an understanding of who God is than of who Jesus is! Most people in the ancient world pointed to Caesar as the earthly expression of God, just as the Egyptians before them pointed to Pharaoh. Followers of Jesus countered with their understanding of God that looks like a Jewish peasant that preached love, compassion, justice, and non-violence.

Brian McLaren, an author and church leader focusing on the emergence of a postmodern, post-colonial Christian faith, concludes that seeing Jesus as the “Word of God made flesh,” as recorded in John 1:14, acts to deconstruct the old preexisting

concept of God. **Jesus, then, more than just a godly man, leads us to an entire new concept of God – to redefine who God is. Who Jesus was, therefore, is not dependent on miraculous birth stories.**

Religious scholar Diana Butler Bass describes **the Incarnation as less of a set of doctrines and beliefs about Jesus than it is about the living reality of Jesus in human community.** This is what I was trying to express in my recent sermon about my week-long experience at the Christ in the Desert (Benedictine) Monastery in New Mexico. This is what many of us experienced at last Thursday's Luncheon Club, when thirty-two 4th, 5th, and 6th graders from Kendall Whittier Elementary School performed Christmas music and shared a meal with us in Fellowship Hall. Bass states:

Incarnation is being around a table where there are people of every color, different languages and different political and theological points of view, different ways of living their lives, different understandings of who they are to love, having a meal together and being one and caring for one another despite all those differences – that's a moment of God being incarnate in our midst.

Incarnation happens when you give someone a cup of water, when you feed the hungry person, when you care for the sick, when you visit the prisoner, when you welcome the stranger. And those are basic things that we are called to do in Christ because Christ IS the other person. 'Insofar as you do this to the least of these you are doing these things for me.' [Using imagery from Matthew 25]

I could go on all day with this. But one more. Emilie Townes, professor of African-American History/Theology at Yale Divinity School, characterizes Incarnation this way.

Incarnation, for me, means presence; presence in terms of how God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are alive in the world, and how that aliveness gets manifested, gets recognized, is seen, is felt, is tasted, is experienced in our lives as God's working in the world through others and through us.

And so it's not only about Jesus' presence, which so many people, I think, like to rest there. But also how God as Creator and the Holy Spirit are at work in the world.

Incarnation, then, becomes those tangible moments when I have no doubt that God is alive, God is working, and God is not going to let any of us go.

So during this Christmas season, as we hear again the ancient stories from Matthew and Luke about Jesus' miraculous birth, I encourage you to not look upon their literal interpretation as some kind of litmus test in order to be considered a "true" Christian. Instead, reflect upon the fact that in the life of Jesus we still believe that there was a literal experience of a living God.

For as we will read together in a few moments in our Affirmation of Faith, written by Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg, "Jesus is, for us as Christians, the decisive revelation of what a life full of God looks like... He is the decisive disclosure of what can be seen of God embodied in a human life." That's what I think it means when the gospel writer John states that Jesus is the "Word of God made flesh."

As we strive to understand this idea of the Incarnation for our lives today, an important thing to remember is that the Incarnation is not only about Jesus, not just about something that happened 2000 years ago. It's also about us today. Wherever we find ourselves, the Mystery of Life dwells within us and is not limited to a time or place, but a part of every aspect of our lives. What we *do* in and through our lives, for better or for worse, is the measure of the incarnation in the world.

As stated in a Taize chant, "**Where love and caring are, there is God.**" **THAT'S the Incarnation!**

Amen.

Resources:

Curriculum:

Living the Questions 2.0: An Introduction to Progressive Christianity. 2008.

Saving Jesus Redux (Living the Questions) 2010.