

Sermon for Christmas, 2010

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[Isaiah 9:2-7](#) / [Psalm 96](#) / [Titus 2:11-14](#) / [Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#)

Oddities of Incarnation

It is striking to me this year just how odd the incarnation is. Odd as it is this time of year when we proclaim peace, and yet the commercial world comes to life with frenetic, stress-filled activity – all the more pronounced as the economy begins to find its feet again. Reassuring when at last our government ratifies a treaty that will take another step towards dismantling the dangerous legacy of the Cold War. Odd as we Christians gather to pray to the Christ Child while some of our more vociferous atheist sisters and brothers see Christmastide as a critical time to make more public statements – from billboards along highways in New York to a recent Op Ed in the Wall Street Journal – about how crazy some think we really are. Odd indeed that the story of a little baby born in a small town in Judea two thousand years ago – an image at face value that might be a little bit sweet and comforting – becomes a source of discomfort. Reassuring that the incarnation still means something – even to those who most heartily deny it any value or meaning in our post-enlightenment, post-Christian, post-modern, post-industrial, post-everything world. Odd that our messages of joy are lifted up at this time even as we know some whom we most dearly love face considerable suffering, trial, and even death. Reassuring that Jesus was born into this, too.

We Christians have wrestled with the oddity of the incarnation for as long as we've called ourselves "Christian." The stories of Luke and Matthew and the theologizing of John are not finished bits of history or well-studied, carefully weighed measurements of empirical science. They are communities of Christians wrestling with the meaning of Jesus Christ and the stories that surrounded him and how he touched and continued to touch generation to generation the lives of people on spiritual pilgrimage. Atheists are right to refer to them as "myth," but we understand it as myth in the very best sense of the word. They embrace one of the deep mysteries of our faith – a profound sense of "God with us" in the muck and straw of our stabled lives, in the fleshy, fallible and sometimes stinky nature of human existence. . . God with us in our best moments and – perhaps even more importantly – in our worst. We have wrestled with the oddity of a God who needed to be changed from soiled swaddles, vulnerable to disease, tyranny, and all the uncertainties every human being faces – so much so that our key doctrinal statements, our ancient Creeds, had to very clearly establish that Jesus was born of a woman and yet fully divine. It's an offense to the ancient philosophical ideals of a perfect, unassailable God. It's an offense to the elevated humanism of a parallel but equally ancient understanding of a godless, ultimately meaningless life. Together, they form a dualism that haunts us – a dualism that threatens to divorce us in our own hearts and minds from our bodies, that threatens to split the "spiritual" from the soil and grime and sensuality of this life, that puts God "out there" somewhere – either in the gaps of our knowledge (however vast they are!) or in some lofty, incredible heaven that defies logic and reason. Neither are big enough ideas to contain our God. Nor are they real enough.

The incarnation resolves this dualism – in fact, shatters it completely with the cries of a newborn, a newborn God, a newborn Reality that pulls the star dust and messiness of our lives into a cosmic womb and births it anew infused with divinity from before time. If at the one end of our Christian journey stands the cross with Jesus' arms outstretched to a world in love, then at this end, we behold Jesus as a fragile embodiment of that same love. Fragile, because he is vulnerable to our cynical hearts and our tendency to dominate and control what we don't understand. This divine love beholds all of our wanton, craven, messiness and embraces it – the cats outside my office fighting as I write this, the

impatience of today's line at the coffee shop or the grocery store, the homeless begging for a place at table, our irritation with our short existence, our impatient imperfections; our great art, our science and history, our civilizations, our cherished family stories, our striving for something magnificent in a capricious universe. This divine love beholds all of it and then deigns to be born into it, to become one with it, to embrace it so utterly that even God is somehow changed for us from a philosophical abstraction or a thundering, primitive caricature of a deity into an embodied, transformative presence that lives and acts in the very substance of our lives.

Our quibble with atheistic utterances that "God does not exist" is an old one rooted in incarnation. I don't believe in the God they don't believe in either. God does not exist as a provable, measurable thing, like a chair, or a desk. God *is*. God is the root of *is*-ness, says the birth of Jesus to me. Our humanity *is* because God has embraced it so utterly that every reality is part of God's reality now. We can't measure God empirically not because he is an absent watchmaker as our American deism would have it, but because every measurement itself is predicated on an assumption of reality that is God. Without God, there is no measuring stick. In fact, we Christians say, there would be nothing to measure. There would be nothing without God.

And so, Christmas reminds us, we *are*, too. More than mere existences, *we are*. We are touched by the divine hand much more than the outstretched reach of Adam to a bearded deity as in Michelangelo's depiction of the old story in the Sistine Chapel. We are touched from head to toe, from birth to death, from virtue to foible, by a God who loves us so much that nothing would be left untouched. Our faith, then, is that our evolving lives are constantly and consistently infused with this blessing, so much so that our life – whether we choose to recognize it or not – hinges on this love, and there are no words adequate to describe this dependence, and no suffering, no pain, no work of humanity or crash of the cosmic dance can utterly break our bond with this God who is born into us, our DNA, our bones, our ancestry, our past, present, and our future.

Faith in incarnation is not belief in an abstraction, but an embrace of the fullness of reality – known and unknown – a reality that is God in Christ's. The myth of our gospel narratives is a re-telling of this truth that reflects who Jesus is for us: the heart of all that is, the heart of all we truly are. Not one word goes forth from us, not one action, without having been touched by our God. Not one pain passes God's notice or goes unfelt or unrecognized. Not one stumble, not one failing, not one joy or truly precious, cherished moment.

The birth of the Messiah is God's first, great reminder to us and all Creation that we are loved. "Full stop," as Desmond Tutu would say. Body and soul, spirit and flesh, creature, child, healthy and infirm, rich and poor, remembered and forgotten, saint and sinner, long gone and yet-to-be-born – a love that is perfected as it is whispered in the quietude of an infant sleeping and the eyes of wonder of a holy mother, the watchful gaze of a devoted father, the reverent observance of shepherds, animals, and angels – a love that is preparing to overturn everything we thought that was – even death itself – and recast the Cosmos and all our being yet again, for a God who has loved us into life, into being itself, and that we will never be alone.