

Touching and Being Touched

Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 21, 2003

Scripture Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

John 1:1-9,14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Oh, to be a bird

Hearing a loud thump, the startled man rose from his chair to check it out. Outside, the early winter blizzard blew hard across the Nebraska landscape. He heard a second thump, then a third . . . and yet another. The man wasn't even down the hallway when he realized what was happening. A late-leaving flock of birds had gotten caught in the early storm. The birds were throwing themselves at the farm house windows to escape the cold and snow. Being a kind man, he donned a heavy coat and began to make his way outside. When he reached the barn, he threw open the doors so the birds could roost there until the storm passed. Yet, despite the lights in the barn, the birds continued to throw themselves at the house. A little desperate now, the man ran outside the barn waving his arms so he could guide them inside. Of course, any birds that saw him flew away in fear. Then, he had what seemed a pretty good idea. He grabbed a bag of seed from the barn and spread a trail leading to the doors. But, in their terror, the birds ignored the seed. By now, the man was distraught, even frantic. Running outside one last time he realized that hundreds of birds were dying and he was powerless to stop it. Falling to his knees, he cried aloud, "If I were only a bird, they would follow me. I could lead them to safety."

The Incarnation

Our word "incarnate" comes from a Latin word meaning "be made flesh." ("Carnivorous" is based on the same Latin root.) Thus, when we refer to the incarnation or to "God incarnate," we are referring to "God made flesh" . . . God becoming human.

The early church had a word they used to describe Mary that is helpful here: *theotokos*, "the one who gave birth to the one who is Christ." We sometimes think that the point of the Virgin Birth is to emphasize Jesus' divinity. It is not. The early church embraced the teachings about the Virgin Birth because it emphasized Jesus' humanity! An early Christian heretic named Marcion very much believed that Jesus was God. But he couldn't bring himself to see Jesus as truly human, saying, "Away with that lowly manger, those dirty swaddling clothes."¹ All the messiness of childbirth was too much for Marcion! But that very messiness drives home our proclamation that God has experienced life as we experience it. He has celebrated as we celebrate and suffered as we suffer.

1. from an excellent article on Mary by Timothy George in *Christianity Today*. You can find the full article on-line at www.christianity.com.

Of all the claims we Christians make, this is the most remarkable . . . that God became one of us, that the “Word became flesh and lived among us.” The Nebraskan farmer wanted to become a bird, even if just for a few minutes, so he could lead the flock to refuge from the storm. Of course he couldn’t. But for God all things are possible, even becoming a human . . . and God did just that. In truth, the whole thing is so incomprehensible that we shouldn’t be surprised many people find it all just too much to believe. As Cardinal Ratzinger recently put it, many people lack faith because they are “no longer capable of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the whole.” And what a “whole” our proclamation is: that 2000 years ago, the baby lying in that cold, dirty manger was God himself . . . that in the beginning he was with God and was God . . . that through him all things came into being . . . that he is the true light that enlightens the world! When Joan Osborne sang “What if God was one of us?” we shout, “He was . . . He is!”

But how could such a thing be? We celebrate the incarnation each year at this time, though we probably don’t take much time to reflect on its true meaning. When we take a few minutes to think about what it means to say that Jesus “was God” (John 1:1), it is easy to get off track. In trying to make sense of the incarnation, Christians have sometimes made one or the other of two mistakes. We are tempted to diminish either Jesus’ humanity or his divinity. Here’s an example.

Not long ago, I heard a prominent Baptist preacher ask his congregation “How many humans have walked on water?” The people in the pews were ready to answer “One!” But the preacher surprised them by saying, “None! Jesus wasn’t human; he was the God-man.” Now, I guess I understand the point the preacher was trying to make . . . but to say “Jesus wasn’t human” is woefully misguided. A central claim of Christians for nearly 2000 years has been that Jesus was fully and completely human. When Luke writes about the baby in the manger, he is writing about a fully human baby, not God somehow inhabiting an infant’s body like something from *The Invasion of the Body*

Embracing Mystery

We can never fully understand how it is that Jesus can be fully and completely human AND fully and completely God, though not all of God. In the same way, we can never fully understand the Trinity, how it is that God can be three AND one. Such things are beyond our comprehension, but that does not mean they are untrue. Truth is certainly not defined by our ability to understand it.

It is easy to imagine that we have to choose . . . is Jesus human OR God? . . . is God three OR one . . . is the Bible God’s Word OR human’s words? But those are false choices. Part of being Christian is being willing to embrace the “ANDs” of the faith. Embracing the mystery of Jesus’ nature is not a cop-out, it is merely acknowledging that are limits to our intellectual understandings. We lose our moorings to the Christian proclamation when we go too far in emphasizing either Jesus’ humanity or his divinity at the expense of the other.

Snatchers. I think that part of the problem here is that being human can be so “icky” at times. Our bodies can be such a mess! But the sheer physicality of the Christmas story, of God’s incarnation, is essential to the whole thing. Mary would have had to tend to her baby just as all mothers have to tend to theirs. Jesus would have caught colds and gotten tired. As the years wore on, he aged. He got wrinkles. He bled. He died. When Jesus emptied and humbled himself, taking on human form (Philippians 2:6-8), he went all the way. Indeed, Jesus was the truest human. Humans were originally created to live in right relationship with God. Of course, we don’t. We insist on going our own way. But Jesus truly loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength and his neighbors as himself. To be Christ-like is to be truly human!

Some Christians have fully embraced Jesus’ humanity but only by denying his divinity. But Jesus’ divinity is the underlying theme of John’s Gospel. Surely, John knew how difficult this would be for people to accept – that this Jewish man from Nazareth, crucified by the Romans, had been God himself. It can’t surprise us that most people on this earth don’t believe such a thing. It is much easier to think of Jesus as someone who was closer to God than anyone else has been . . . or no more than a prophet of God . . . or no more than one of history’s good and wise men . . . surely *not* God. But Christmas is about far more . . . the stakes are much higher. Christmas is about God-made-flesh, able to touch and to be touched.

Daily Bible Readings

(these readings point us toward Jesus' true nature: fully God and fully human!)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 John 1:1-18 John's entire Prologue to his Gospel</p>	<p>Day 2 Colossian 1:15-20 Jesus as "the image of the invisible God"</p>
<p>Day 3 Philippians 2:1-11 The Christ-hymn</p>	<p>Day 4 Revelation 5 Jesus is worshiped as both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God.</p>
<p>Day 5 John 2:1-11 Jesus goes to a wedding with his Mom and does as she says!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Bible Academy Registration is now open: www.standrewccl.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. This business of the incarnation calls for us to think BIG. We need to let it blow our minds. Jesus was and is God . . . even as a squirming, burping, messy, very human baby . . . not all of God, but fully and completely God. You might make two lists. On the first, list some thoughts about what it means to you that Jesus was God. Why do Christians cling so firmly to this claim? Why does Jesus' divinity really matter? Would it be enough for him to have been a wise teacher or prophet? On the second list, outline some thoughts on what it means to you that Jesus was fully human. Why does this matter? Why did the early church so firmly reject Marcion's teachings (see the text box on page 1) that Jesus wasn't really human? What would we lose if we were to deny Jesus' humanity?
2. John could have begun his Gospel in any way he wanted. He could have begun with something like the Christmas story told by Luke and Matthew. But John did not. He instead opened his Gospel with this hymn-like presentation of Jesus as the pre-existent Word. Still, traditionally, Christian churches have read John's Prologue during the Christmas season. Why do you think this is so? Try reading John 1:1-18 as a Christmas story. What sort of story is it? What does it add to the traditional Christmas stories?