

Incarnation: The Virgin Conception John 1:14

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It would be hard to live in the US this time of year and not realize that something is going on. Houses are decorated. Lights are up. Stores are packed. If an alien was to land his spaceship here he'd probably look around and ask, "What's all the hubbub?"

Most people in America would say, "It's Christmas." A few might say, "It's Happy Holidays," but we retain enough cultural fragments of a Christian heritage to at least acknowledge Christmas, even while merchandizing it and sentimentalizing it into irrelevance. This causes many Americans to know it's Christmas without the foggiest idea of what that actually means.

If there's any place or people who ought to know what it's all about, it's the church and the people who have placed all their hope in a little baby born in a manger. Who was this baby and what made his birth so absolutely unique?

Expressing this is not so easy to do as the claims of Christianity regarding this child are so staggering. Even artists in history who paint Jesus' birth resort to symbols to paint his glory on canvas. It is typical for them to depict him with a halo of glory....



What are they trying to say? They are trying to communicate theology and not simply theology, but wonder and worship. Does a halo do it?

It can't but it tries, much like this sermon series can't but it will try to teach and celebrate an estimable wonder, what is this all about?

The Incarnation

Let's begin by making a long word—incarnation—a comfortable one. We are familiar with *Christmas*. That word is literally "Christ's mass" or "The Lord's Supper." It dates back a 1,000 years when the Lord's Supper was the highlight of the Advent celebration. Over time it was so associated with the celebration of Christ's birth that they became nearly synonyms. *Christ's mass? Oh yes, celebrating when Jesus was born.*

The better word is *incarnation*. It doesn't sound as nice in songs, "*We wish you a Merry Incarnation...*" But it at least clearly says what the hubbub is all about. Incarnation. *In* means "into;" *carna* means "flesh;" *tion* is "the process of." So, incarnation is "the process of coming in flesh." That's a good word for a biblical truth. It is most easily seen in John 1:14:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Let's focus on that first phrase, *the Word became flesh*. If we had time, we could read verses 1-18 which is John's prologue or introduction to his lengthy gospel. He doesn't start it with how Mary found out she was going to conceive or shepherds or stars like Matthew or Luke. John's purpose is different. John writes to tell us what Jesus' life means. To convey what it meant he had to avoid cultural and religious stereotypes and preconceived notions.

There were many legends of gods giving birth to sons through procreation with female deities or even earthly women. If John would have said, *In the beginning was the Son and the Son was with God and the Son was God*, people would have interpreted it through the grid of their false religion. He doesn't use "Son" or even "Jesus." Rather, he uses "Word." Why? That is a title that had only good baggage. There was rich Old Testament teaching about the heavens and the earth created by the Word of God; the Word was God's self-expression.

The Word was no less "Jesus the Son of God" than if he would have written that. It was rather a title that allowed John to introduce someone diametrically different in origin and character and power from any religious or cultural legend.

The Word *became*. He begins his gospel in verse 1 by making it clear that this person preexisted creation; he was there *in the beginning*. He was an eternal personality in that he was "with" God but mysteriously also *was* God. While not Trinitarian explicitly, he lays the groundwork for a preexistent eternal One who is a revelation of God (Word) and who is God himself.

This One, this Word *became flesh*. In his pre-incarnate state, he was like the Father—spiritual. He was like the Holy Spirit. He was non-physical. Here is a wondrous mystery. In verse 3, the Word creates everything. He creates the world of matter and atoms and molecules... and human flesh. In verse 3, the Word *makes* human flesh and in verse 14, the Word *becomes* human flesh. That a toy maker could create a toy man out of nothing is amazing; a toy maker becoming a toy, now that's beyond comprehension. That is incarnation.

The Son of God becoming what he was not—material. Earthy. Matter. Flesh. The result is a baby conceived in Mary's womb who is entirely human with all that is essential to humanity and entirely God with all that is essential to being God. *The Word became flesh*. God

became human. The result is a fetus growing in Mary that is simultaneously a fetus AND the Lord God of the universe. That is a mystery even our best creeds only get close to.

Athanasian Creed (500 AD)

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man...perfect God; and perfect Man...Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but assumption of the Manhood by God."

Chalcedonian Creed (451 AD)

"...one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably..."

"No Two Natures, no Incarnation; no Incarnation, no Christianity in any distinctive sense."
(B.B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, p. 211)

I think that is true. So for these three weeks, we are going to dig into the incarnation. The rest of today's message deals with one aspect of how it happened. We call it the virgin birth although it would be better called in our modern day, the virgin conception. Modern medicine and in vitro implantation allow for virgins to be surrogate mothers and give birth. What has never been done and will never be done is for a human egg to conceive without male sperm. It is the conception that is the miracle and the virgin birth the incredible result. Years ago newsman Larry King was asked, if he could interview anyone and ask them anything, who would it be? He answered that it would be Jesus and the question he would ask is, "Were you born of a virgin?" because the answer to that question defines the ages. Indeed. So let's dig in.

The Virgin Birth in Prophecy

- *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* (Genesis 3:15)
- *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."* (Isaiah 7:14)

Matthew's gospel says that Jesus' birth was a fulfillment of Isaiah 7. The discerning reader of the Old Testament would see that the prophesied one, the descendant of David, would be born in a most unique way.

The Gospel Birth Narratives

The angel Gabriel told Mary

"And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'" (Luke 1:30-34)

We see Mary's astonishment at what the angel has to say to her. Her question is almost humorous in light of all the messianic things said about her soon coming Son. She isn't

awed by who she would give birth to; she is wondering how it will happen. Can you see her head spinning? *I am going to give birth? How? I'm engaged but not married and I have never known a man sexually. I'm giving birth to the Son of the Most High. OK. But how?*

"And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:35-38)

The angel's answer to how Mary the virgin could be pregnant as a virgin is the power of God. *"For nothing will be impossible with God."* We continue in the story to Mary's fiancé Joseph. Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. Mary may have told him. Imagine the fear and trepidation for this young woman. Mary is all of 15 years old in a culture where sex and pregnancy outside of marriage was strictly forbidden and severely punished. What would Joseph say? He will know the child is not his as he had never been with Mary sexually. *What else can he conclude other than I have been unfaithful to him? What will my parents say? What will my village say? What will Joseph do?*

The angel Gabriel told Joseph

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Not only was it a virgin conception, it was a virgin birth in that Joseph and Mary were married but did not know each other sexually until after Jesus was born. If you are wondering, *how is that possible?* Apparently a glorious angel appearing to you and telling you that your fiancé is pregnant with the Savior of the world and warning you greatly aids in marital chastity.

When we look at prophecy and the accounts of Gabriel, Mary, and Joseph, and the virgin birth, why is the virgin birth a critical foundation stone upon which Christianity stands?

While it is a mystery, the virgin birth was God's chosen means to unite his Son with a human body without uniting his Son with sin.

Could God have done it another way? Sure. He is God and I'm sure he could have come up with another way or just spontaneously done it. But if he had simply spontaneously arrived here as the God-man, what would we always wonder? Was Jesus really one of us? Was he really human like we are human? Can he relate to me? Is he sympathetic with human weakness? What is more distinctively human than being born of a human?

I know this in a way I never knew before. Six months and two days ago, my first child, a daughter was born. I was there. I saw it. It was one of the most powerful and spiritual moments of my whole life. I'll never forget it. If you come up to me and say, "*Your daughter is wonderful,*" I'll agree. If you say, "*She's so wonderful I'm not sure she's human,*" I'll disagree there. What will I say? "Here's what I can tell you. I was there and I can tell you that she is fully human because I saw her come from a human." The human birth of Jesus insures that all of us realize Jesus is completely one of us. Fully human. The fact that the conception was virginal insures that we see him as greatly more than human.

And to note, this virgin birth was God's mechanism to have him born of a woman but not born in sin and without Adam's guilt. If he was born in sin or born guilty, he could not have died in the place of sinners as he would be dying for his own guilt. He united the second person of the Trinity with human flesh without uniting him with human sin.

Brilliant, don't you think? You may think there was another way God could have done it but the way he did it....Wow!

The Virgin Birth Affirms the Miraculous Nature of Salvation

If you are reading through the Bible with acceptance, long before you arrive at the virgin birth you have accepted a supernatural worldview, creation, supernatural revelation, an enemy of God named Satan, a redeeming God seen in miracles like the crossing of the Red Sea, and a providential God doing his work more subtly through births in old age like Sarah and lions not eating Daniel. By the time you get to the New Testament, the assumptions needed for a virgin birth are already in place. This doesn't make it less miraculous, it simply makes it more believable.

It's difficult to say, I'm okay, God, with you creating the world and the miracles of the Old Testament, but, a virgin birth? There's no way!

Really? If there is a God who is as he self-reveals himself to be, eternal, all powerful, personal, Trinitarian, love, Savior, and infinitely glorious, is the virgin birth that hard to accept? You can't accept that there is a God like the Old Testament describes and trip on the virgin birth. The whole biblical explanation of reality is supernatural and the virgin birth is part of it and affirms it.

The Virgin Birth Makes Clear That Salvation is Totally from God

The verse before "the Word became flesh" says it well, "*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*" (John 1:12-13)

When a virgin gives birth, that's a miracle. When she gives birth to the God-man, it is a wonder. Where did salvation come from? Man? Joseph? Mary? No. We ought not to draw halos over them. The Savior was born by God's saving activity, not man's. He is from God just as salvation is from God.

How about you today, my friend? Have you received this gift? *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* Believing in the virgin birth doesn't save anyone. Believing that this child became an adult who died in our place for our sin, that belief in "Jesus' name" will save anyone. It makes sense, doesn't it? There is a God who created all that is including us. Sin and brokenness is all around and in our hearts; few struggle to believe that in this sick world. But to believe in the Christ-

child, the Savior, this is the key. If God made the world, he can do a virgin birth, and if he can birth a Savior out of a sinner, then he can birth salvation out of you. And he will, if you believe in Jesus and become a follower of him. With God, nothing is impossible.

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