

The Incarnation: a Progressive Perspective

Fourth Sunday of Advent

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 21, 2014

For those of you who have been attending College Hill for some time, what I plan to share with you today is not new information. For we have studied and explored the issue of the literalness or not of the birth narratives of Jesus, as found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, in our Adult Church School classes over the years, as well as presented in previous sermons. But it bears repeating, especially if this information is new to you, and **in light of those who continue to insist that good and faithful Christians *must* take these stories, like the virgin birth, as literal history. What they don't realize, however, is that their insistence contributes to the leading of many thoughtful persons of faith out of the church, and some out of organized religion altogether.**

My personal approach to this matter, as a pastor and preacher, is that if folks truly believe the birth of Jesus happened exactly as it is told in scripture, that's fine. Who among us hasn't believed that? I add, however, that **those who agree with most modern biblical scholars that these stories were never meant to be taken as literal history, but rather as metaphorical stories that point to a deeper truth, that is just as faithful an interpretation.**

Here is what's at the heart of the matter. It's called the **doctrine of the Incarnation**. It's a big theological word that seeks to answer the post-resurrection question: **How was God enfleshed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth?** According to the ancient orthodox formula, and traditional church doctrine (as found in the Nicene Creed and elsewhere), Jesus was not only different in degree with other human beings, but also different in kind. Many theologians argue, however, that being different in kind, in substance itself, means Jesus *can't* really, then, be fully human. So in a 2004 article entitled "The Meaning of the Christmas Myths," now-retired Episcopal Bishop and member of The Jesus Seminar, **John Shelby Spong** concludes:

We do both the Bible and human scholarship a grave disservice when we try to literalize and make history out of these interpretive myths, created by the second or third generation of these who were the disciples of Jesus. **No reputable biblical scholar in the world today, Catholic or Protestant, treats these narratives of Matthew and Luke as history. It is time the church said that publicly.**

Why do we then keep these stories and repeat them every year if they are not factually true? That is usually the question of an adult who has had his or her fairy tale religion shaken. The answer is simple. **Truth is so much**

bigger than literalism... Some human experiences are so large, so real, so life changing and so defining that the words used to describe those moments must break open the imagination if they are to capture this kind of truth.

That is what myth does. That is what the biblical stories of Jesus' birth are all about. There was something present in this Jesus, they said, that opened human lives to new dimensions of reality. Human beings could never have produced what we have experienced in Jesus. In him, they exclaimed, **we believe that we have met eternity breaking into time, transcendence entering the mundane, the divine in the life of the human.**

If that is our experience with the adult Jesus, then his birth must have been marked with heavenly signs that drew people to him. That is what these stories are trying to say. Our task is not to master the details or to pretend that myths are history. It is rather to **enter the experience that caused the myths surrounding his birth to be born, to be transformed by that life and to become a new creation through that experience.**

If that occurs, these early Christians were saying, we too will see the star of Bethlehem, hear angels sing, and like the wise men and shepherds of old, begin our journey toward the mystery and wonder of God.

Spong, and a majority of progressive scholars, conclude that the **biblical authors were simply trying to express how God was present in this Jesus of Nazareth. Our task, then, as progressives, is not to insist on a literal interpretation of the scriptures, or to absolutize ancient church creeds and doctrines. Rather, we are called to introduce and open people up to the understanding of an experience of God.**

Unfortunately, however, many prefer to insist that we maintain church tradition, as well as adhere to ancient church doctrine, instead of focusing primarily on 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' actual message.**

We also need to be reminded that divine and/or virgin birth stories, were not uncommon back in the ancient Mediterranean world. From a historical perspective, Jesus Seminar scholar **Jon Dominic Crossan** concludes 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 actually 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 instead looks like a Jewish peasant that preached love, forgiveness, compassion, justice, and non-violence. Jesus, then, more than just a godly spiritual man, leads us to an entirely new concept of God – to redefine**

who God is. That, in a nutshell, is why many of us progressives still self-identify as a Christian. **Who Jesus was, therefore, is not dependent on miraculous birth stories.**

Religious scholar and author **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. 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]"

That is how you keep the Christ in Christmas! Finally, **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.

As we strive to understand this theological concept of the Incarnation in 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 in the birth of Jesus. It's also about us today. Knowing that we are created in the image of God, and believing that the Spirit of God dwells within each one of us, we too incarnate, enflesh, God's presence in the world.**

What we *do* in and through our lives, for better or for worse, is a measure, then, of the incarnation of God in the world today. For as stated in a popular Taize chant, *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*. **"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.