

The Story of God and Us: Incarnation

Westheimer Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/433341767>

Gethsemane Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/433338173>

Pastors' Discussion: <https://vimeo.com/432941420>

Sermon Workbook: <https://www.stlukesmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GodandUs-workbook-web.pdf>

Though Jesus was born at a specific time in history, there is no point at which Christ, the second person of the Trinity, did not exist. Christ is eternally existent.

- The Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." (John 1:1-2)
- John the Baptist testifies that Jesus existed before him, though we know that John was born before Jesus (John 1:15).
- Jesus declares that he existed before Abraham (John 8:57-58).
- Paul writes in Colossians that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, and that all creation was made through him (Colossians 1:15-16).

When God became incarnate in Jesus (from the Latin *incarno* - derived from the prefix *in-* which means "in" and *caro*, which means "flesh" - meaning, "to make into flesh" or "to be made into flesh"), it did nothing to change God's nature. St. Athanasius, one of the early church fathers, compared it to the way that the sun is not changed by the contact of its rays with the earth. Jesus is fully God.

...Jesus is also fully human.

This is the great mystery of the incarnation. Christian tradition refers to this concept of Jesus being 100% God and 100% human as the "hypostatic union."

The scripture attests to the divinity of Jesus:

- Jesus said, "The Father and I are one." (John 10:30)
- He also said, "The person who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9)
- Jesus was called Lord (Matthew 8:20) and the Son of God (John 10:36)
- He had power over nature (Matthew 8:26) and over death (John 11)
- He had the ability to forgive sin (Mark 2:1-12)
- Jesus rules as God (Hebrews 1:8)
- He is the exact representation of God (Hebrews 1:1-4)

The humanity of Jesus is attested to in his:

- Human lineage through Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1)
- Hunger (Matthew 4:2) and thirst (John 19:28)
- Sadness (John 11:35)
- Exhaustion (John 4:6)
- Temptation (Matthew 4:1)

- Physical death (Luke 23:46)

There are two schools of thought on whether or not God always intended to become incarnate, i.e. was the incarnation of the Son made necessary by man's sin or did God intend the incarnation of the Son from before the creation of the world?

Necessary

- This view understands that it was humans exercise of free will and resulting sin that occasioned the incarnation. God loves humans so much that it would be impossible for God to leave humans in a sinful state or a path of destruction. Though humans have capacity for repentance, they still need Jesus to repair the corruption of human nature that has been brought about by sin.

Fortuitous

- This view sees the incarnation as the fulfillment of the love of God. God, from the beginning, desired to be present among humanity, which is the reason for creation. God became incarnate not as a result of sin, but as a result of God's desire to make humans temples of the Holy Spirit and to unite human nature with God's nature.

So what do we learn from the incarnation? First, we learn more about God's nature. Put simply, the incarnation shows us what God is like. Jesus is loving = God is loving. Jesus welcomes the outcasts and marginalized = God welcomes the outcasts and marginalized. Jesus forgives even the worst sinners = God forgives even the worst sinners. Jesus deeply cared for the people around him = God deeply cares for us.

Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God and everything we know about God must be measured against the life of Jesus – in other words, Jesus is the filter through which we should see the world and everything in it.

We also learn how to live. Jesus' life and ministry gives us a model for relationships with God and others. His example sets the standard for how we should live. We aren't meant to learn from theoretical instruction, but from seeing an actual person live in that way.

In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul records the earliest Christian hymn. It is called the kenotic hymn, which comes from the Greek word *kenosis*, meaning "to empty."

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form, he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.
 God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is the model by which we should live. Humility is antithetical to our nature, yet this self-emptying is the key to right relationships. Humans are not only prone to the “us-them” divide, but are held captive by the sinful power that accompanies it. When we empty ourselves of our pride and superiority as Jesus did, we are able to cross the divide within ourselves that draws distinctions between people and prevents us from living in full communion with God and others.

Let’s get to brass tacks... what does the incarnation mean for us today?

Because of Jesus’ divine nature, humans are united to God in an intimate way – we are given the gift of communion with God through Jesus. In his treatise *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius wrote, “He was made human so that he might make us gods.”¹

As Dr. Pace said in his sermon, “WE are now the incarnate ones... there are people around us that need to see Jesus and it is up to us to show them.” In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about how we are the body of Christ – the hands and feet and heart. The church is the incarnate body of Christ for the world.

That is both a big blessing and a big responsibility. We are the continuation of Jesus’ ministry on earth. When we consider how to live or respond to the world around us, we should be guided by considering how Jesus would respond were he still on earth in the flesh. The phrase WWJD that was popularized on bracelets and other paraphernalia in the 1990s is a question that we should always be asking ourselves. What would Jesus do?

What would Jesus do in response to people who don’t have enough to eat?
What would Jesus do when a friend loses their parent?
What would Jesus do as a disease ravages our world?
What would Jesus do to help folks who are oppressed?
What would Jesus do for people who have lost their jobs?
What would Jesus do when children are bullied?
What would Jesus do for those who are sick and dying?

The answer to each of those questions is also the answer to “what should I do?”

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Why do you think its offensive for some people to think of God becoming a human baby?
2. Which of the human characteristics of Jesus do you most want to emulate?
3. How has knowing God as a human impacted your faith?

¹ Athanasius, *De incarnatione* 54,3, cf. *Contra Arianos* 1.39

4. Do you believe the incarnation was necessary or fortuitous? Does it matter?
5. What does it mean for you, both spiritually and practically, that we are now the incarnate ones?
6. Does WWJD guide your decisions? Why or why not?
7. Who has modeled incarnational ministry for you in your life? What might it look like to do that for other people?