

We are continuing today in our sermon series, “The Need for Creed,” where we explore each part of the Apostles’ Creed – what it means and why it matters. Today we turn to the phrase, “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary” – the incarnation. To help us unpack what it means to believe in the incarnation, we turn first to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is preaching good news about God’s deliverance to those in exile. His words will later be repeated in the New Testament by Jesus to describe His mission and ours. Listen for God’s Word.

Read Isaiah 61:1-4.

As we turn to the New Testament today, we turn to the Gospel of Luke. It is a passage often heard during Advent and Christmas. But the message of the incarnation, God’s becoming flesh, has implications for our lives, not only at Christmastime, but all times. Listen to the angel’s proclamation to Mary and to us.

Read Luke 1:26-38.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“How can this be?” It is a question asked by Mary and by all of humanity, as we struggle to understand how the infinite became finite, how God became human. Paul Harvey tells a classic story about one man’s struggle to come to terms with the incarnation. Paul Harvey says,

The man to whom I'm going to introduce you was not a scrooge, he was a kind, decent, good man. But he just didn't believe all that incarnation stuff which the churches proclaim at Christmas Time. It just didn't make sense and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus Story, about God coming to Earth as a man.

"I'm truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite and that he'd much rather just stay at home. And so he did stay at home that night while his family went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier and then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper. Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound...Then another, and then another. Sort of a thump or a thud...At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front

door to investigate he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it. Quickly he put on a coat and tramped through the snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light, but the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in. So he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow, making a trail to the wide open doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them...He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms...Instead, they scattered in every direction except into the warm, lighted barn.

And then, he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me...That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? Because any move he made tended to frighten and confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him.

"If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear and understand." At that moment the church bells began to ring. And as he heard the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas, he sank to his knees in the snow, as he grasped for the first time the meaning of Christmas, why God became human, to help us not be afraid, but to see, to hear, to understand.

From the angel's proclamation and that 1st Christmas to every Christmas since, we, too, have struggled to grasp the meaning of the incarnation – what do we see, hear, and understand in the incarnation about God?

- What does it mean to believe in the incarnation, not just at Christmas, but the other 364 days of the yr?
- What difference does it make to confess in modern day that ancient creed that Jesus Christ was “conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary”?

Go back in history – why did ancient church fathers feel the need to include this phrase in creed?

- Consider antithesis, opposite view: What if Jesus Christ was not *both* fully divine and fully human, but *either* fully divine or fully human?
- Take each side to its extreme & see how it plays out → what the early church faced as it formulated its identity in the face of various worldviews that challenged what it believed

Arius – priest in Alexandria in the 4th century

- Jesus was born a human being. Later, when Spirit descended upon Him like a dove at baptism, God adopted Jesus as his Son
- **Adoptionism – Jesus was human by birth, but divine by adoption**
- Ancient church fathers looked at whole of Scripture
- Last week: **John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.”**
- **If He was the Word in the beginning, then Jesus was divine by *nature at birth*, not by adoption at a later date. He was not only fully human; he was also fully God.**
- **That confession doesn't just have spiritual implications; it has physical implications as well.**
 - If Jesus was only human, not God, then he is **part of the problem, not the solution.**
 - If he only had the experience of our humanity but not the capacity of divinity, then he could not save us. He was in the same boat of our sinful predicament as we are.
 - **In order to save us, He had to be, not only human, but also God.**

What if Jesus was God, but not human?

- What if Jesus was just God masquerading in a human costume?
- What if he was human just in **outward appearance, not in inward experience?** → **DOCETISM**
- Scripture: Jesus' humanity was not just an appearance; it was an authentic human experience.
- Jesus was hungry; he got thirsty; he cried; he knew the pain of suffering, the pain of rejection.
- **And just like his divinity, his humanity didn't just have physical implications; it had spiritual implications as well.**
- Angel's declaration to Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew: Jesus would save his people from their sins.
- In regard to Jesus' ability to save us from our sins, our ancient church fathers said, **“What has not been assumed cannot be redeemed.”**
- **If Jesus had not *taken on* our humanity, he could not *redeem* our humanity. In order to save us, he had first to relate to us. He had to be a human being.**

If Jesus Christ was not fully divine, he would have no divine power to save. If he were not fully human, he would not have the experience to redeem. Jesus had to have both the experience of our humanity to relate to us and the capacity of God to redeem us. He had to be both fully human and fully divine.

Consider our broken relationship with God from the perspective of any broken relationship between two parties.

- The mediator or go-between who can best bring reconciliation is one who has contact points with both parties, who understands what it's like to be each, who doesn't have to *empathize* with one or the other, but who can genuinely *sympathize* with both.
- In order to sympathize with us in our human predicament and bring reconciliation between us and God, Jesus had to be both fully human and fully God.

And so in trying to address the concerns of the adoptionists and those of the docetists, our ancient church fathers declared in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. Well, thanks, we say, for addressing those ancient concerns, for dealing with these issues and calling it case closed. After all, that all took place in the 4th and 5 century, the ancient church. We don't deal with any adoptionists or docetists in the 21st century modern church. Or do we?

Before we are too quick to view these concerns as case-closed and ancient, consider our modern-day temptations to view Jesus as *either* fully human or fully divine.

Ways we as the modern church over-emphasize Jesus' humanity/downplay His divinity

- When we put too much emphasis on our own good works, thinking that just being a good person is enough
- When we place too much importance on our good works, we in effect treat Jesus as a good moral teacher whose teachings we do well to follow.
- In doing so, we downplay our own sinfulness and the need for Jesus' sacrifice for us.
- **We place more importance on our efforts for God, rather than God's efforts for us in Jesus Christ.**
- **Mission of the church – when we focus only on physical needs (social justice) and neglect spiritual needs (evangelism)**

Ways we as the modern church over-emphasize Jesus' divinity/downplay His humanity

- When we focus only on our spiritual destiny, believing this world does not matter; only the world to come matters
- **“Sometimes we are so heavenly focused that we are no earthly good”**
- **When we focus only on the world to come, not the world that is, we neglect Jesus' call to care for the least, the last, and the lost.**
- **Mission of the church – when we focus only on spiritual needs (evangelism) and neglect physical needs (social justice)**
- The words we heard from the prophet Isaiah would later become Jesus' first sermon in his ministry as told in Luke 4.
- **When we neglect to join Jesus in that earthy ministry of bringing good news to the oppressed, in binding up the broken-hearted, in proclaiming liberty to the captives, and in comforting those**

who mourn, we risk emphasizing the spiritual life over the physical life, both in our profession of Christ and in our own lives.

So how do we hold in faithful tension Christ's humanity and His divinity? How do we live out that ancient creed of the incarnation in our modern world?

1. First, we hold it as a message of comfort.

- It is tempting to hit the highlights in Christ's life: Christmas – Good Friday – Easter
- But what about the days and years in between? Those days when Jesus cried while he was teething as a little baby? When he fell and scraped his knee as a little boy? When he dealt with a runny nose or a bad day in the carpenter's shop? When he laughed at a good story or cried at the death of a loved one? When he felt the loneliness of being misunderstood or the rejection of those who claimed to be his best friends?
- To believe in the incarnation is to believe that Jesus experienced every experience we experience.
- And so when we are tempted to jump straight from one mountain top experience to the next in our own lives, to try to forget the valleys in between, until those valleys become so deep that we wonder if anyone understands what we are going through – the incarnation assures us there is One who does understand.
- To believe in the incarnation is to confess with the author of Hebrews 4:15 that, **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested as we are.”**
- Jesus does not stand at a distance trying to empathize with our experience, but rather he is able to sympathize with us because our experience has been his experience.
- No matter what you are going through, Jesus has been there, and he is there with you now.

2. The message of the incarnation is a message of comfort. It is also a message of hope.

- Hebrews 4:15 continues, **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”**
- Our experience has been His experience. He has been tempted in every way that we have. Yet he did not give into that temptation; he was without sin.
- For those of us who do give into temptation, who know what it is to sin, Jesus offers us forgiveness as only God can, He offers us a way out to overcome temptation as only God can, He offers us salvation as only God can, and He offers us the promise that only God can offer: that our brokenness will one day be made whole, and all things will be made new.

3. The message of the incarnation is a message of comfort; it is a message of hope; and it is a message of mission.

- To believe that God became human, that God himself entered into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, is to believe that **God is not removed from the world, but involved in the world.**
- God is not some spectator in the Super Bowl football stadium, watching from a distance. God is on the field, actively and creatively participating with us.
- John 1:14, **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”**
- Eugene Petersen - *The Message*: **“The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”** At the birth of Jesus, God moved into our neighborhood.
- He didn't just move in temporarily some 2,000 years ago and then move out when Jesus ascended into heaven. He moved into the neighborhood permanently – through you and through me.
- After His resurrection, Jesus said in John 20:21, **“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”**

- After his ascension, at Pentecost, he sent the Holy Spirit to give us power to continue His work.
- **That same Spirit that was upon Jesus, that anointed Jesus to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim release to the captive, and to comfort those who mourn – that same Spirit has now been given to us to go and do likewise...and even MORE!**
- Officer Retreat – John 14:12 – Joan Gray: “Our living relationship with Jesus Christ opens up to us the power that He has to be used for Him.”

The message of Jesus’ incarnation is the mission of incarnational ministry.

- The Word that became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood has now moved us into neighborhoods today to carry out His mission.
- **To believe in the incarnation is to believe that God is not removed from the world, but involved in the world; and to believe in the incarnation is to believe that we the Church are not removed from the world, but involved in the world.**
- Like the message of the incarnation, the mission of the incarnation has both physical and spiritual implications.
- We are not involved in our neighborhoods only in regard to the spiritual concerns of our neighborhoods – evangelism - but removed from its physical concerns of social justice
- Nor are we to be involved in our neighborhoods only in regard to physical concerns of social justice, but removed in regard to its spiritual concerns - evangelism
- “incarnation” – literally “embody in the flesh” → embody the full Gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ came to offer us salvation by caring for our physical needs and spiritual needs
- To embody that Gospel, we are called to be both a physical presence and a spiritual presence in the world
- Have you allowed God to move you into your neighborhood, to embody the Gospel by caring for your neighbors’ physical and spiritual needs?
- How is God calling us individually and corporately to be a physical and spiritual presence in our neighborhood today?