

Infancy Divided by Infinity

Preached FCCW January 5, 2020

Text: John 1:1-20

From the most ancient myths about the world's beginnings to the Big Bang Theory, people have always craved explanations for how the universe functions. Especially when the universe presents us with what seem to be paradoxes.

That same quest for truth concerning whatever boggles the human mind is reflected in the approaches taken by the Gospels with regards to Jesus. The Christmas stories tell us that the child born to Mary was both truly God and truly human. Which is about as paradoxical as you can get. The name that theologians have given this belief is *the Doctrine of the Incarnation*. Literally, God in the flesh.

Matthew and Luke make the case for the Incarnation in their Gospels through the storylines of Joseph, Mary and angels to explain how, though *born* of a woman, Jesus was *conceived* by the Holy Spirit. Which makes him God in the flesh.

John's Gospel tells the Christmas story in its own unique way. John begins with the story behind the birth stories. From John's perspective, the birth of Jesus was more than a historical incident; it was a cosmic event.

The first words of the Gospel of John are "In the beginning..." If those words sound familiar, there's a good reason. The very first words of the Bible are also, "In the beginning..." and they introduce the story of how God created the universe. That's no coincidence. John's take on the Incarnation takes us all the way back to the Creation of the universe. He writes, "In the beginning was the Word (that's, Word with a capital W), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Because he was a Jew, he was influenced by the Jewish belief expressed in the book of Genesis that the Creation of all things was initiated with God's spoken Word. As in, "God *said*, 'Let there be light.' And there was light."

The other form of thinking in John's world was Hellenistic or Greek philosophy. The Greeks also believed in a Word (capital W) which they called the *Logos*. This *Logos* was the embodiment of the rational principle that governed the universe. So, for both the Jews and the Greeks, each in their way, the Word was the key to understanding the universe and everything in it.

But John had a surprise for both Jewish and Greek thinkers. He personalized the Word by calling it, not an "it," but a "he." "*He* was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through *him* and without *him* not one thing came into being. When John assigns a pronoun to describe the Word, he's not talking about a disembodied, abstract principle. He's talking about Jesus. But when he talks about Jesus, what he has in mind is more than a person who was born in a Bethlehem stable and died on a cross outside Jerusalem. John is claiming that Christ was with

God “in the beginning,” as in “the beginning of creation.” Not only was Christ with God at the beginning of Creation, but John also says that Jesus *was* God! John’s message is that the unifying principle of the universe is not a principle at all, but a person. Jesus Christ.

John goes on to say, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son.” There is John’s explanation of the Incarnation. The Word that was (and is) God, became flesh and lived among us. This was a claim that defied the great religious and philosophical assumptions of John’s time.

The heart of the Jewish faith was the insistence that there was only one God. To proclaim that Jesus and God were the same was nothing short of blasphemy. The Greek philosophers considered Reason to be the highest power in the universe. Perfection existed only in the conceptual realm. Physical objects were only flawed expressions of some ideal. To the Greeks, it was absurd to think that the Word, or Logos, would take up residence in a less than perfect human form.

The Jews had a knowledge of God that came through the Law of Moses. The Greeks could contemplate the meaning of life through philosophy and reason. But the Incarnation points to a love that surpasses all human knowledge and, at the same time the possibility of an intimate relationship with the Creator of all things.

So, John’s telling of the Christmas story comes across with something more like a mathematical equation than a narrative: Incarnation = Infancy divided by Infinity. The constant in this equation is Jesus, the Word—which is God, become flesh—like us. The equation’s variable is our response to the Word who dwells with us. “But to all who *received* him, who *believed* in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

I don’t know, maybe someone, someday will come up with what turns out to be the ultimate, grand “Theory of Everything” that solves every riddle of *how* the universe functions by tying together all its loose ends in a way that satisfies our intellectual need for order in the world.

The fact will remain though, that whether you comprehend every mystery of the cosmos, or whether you go through life believing the Earth is flat and the moon is made of cheese, won’t make an ounce of difference in how you live your life. We can get along just fine in life without comprehending *how* the physical laws of the universe work. In fact, most of are doing that every day.

On the other hand, how we perceive the *why* of Jesus’ Incarnation *will* profoundly affect who we are, how we live, and what kind of world we are creating. John gives us this all-important implication of belief in the Incarnation: “In him was life and that life was the light of men.” This reminds us that the perfect light that Christ brought into the world cannot be extinguished, not even by the world’s deepest darkness. But at the same time, *Jesus relies on us—fallible flesh*

and blood humans that we are--to be guided by and to bear that light into the places of darkness in our world.

And that is perhaps the single greatest paradox of all.

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