

TITLE: "What If God Was One of Us?"

Matthew 1:18-25 (NT p. 1)

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Introduction – Fully God and fully human?

In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, by Bill Waterman, Calvin is a mischievous little boy and Hobbes is his stuffed tiger who can walk and talk and play with Calvin. Suzie is Calvin's arch enemy because Suzie is (EWWWW!) a girl. I used the first part of this on Christmas Eve, but there is more:

Calvin and his tiger Hobbes are out playing in the snow and discussing the real possibility that Calvin has been so bad all year that he will get no presents from Santa. Suddenly, Calvin says, "OK, Hobbes, I have a plan."

"Yeah?" says Hobbes, his curiosity up.

"If I do ten spontaneous acts of good will a day from now till Christmas, Santa will HAVE to be lenient in judging the rest of this last year! I can claim I turned over a new leaf!"

Hobbes ponders, "Ten spontaneous acts of good will a day? That's pretty many."

Calvin frowns and says, "Don't remind me."

Hobbes turns, looks down the street and says, "Well, here's your chance. Suzie's coming this way."

Calvin, true to his nature, begins making a snowball and says, "Maybe I'll start tomorrow, and do TWENTY a day."

Calvin fires the snowball at Suzie. It hits her with a loud “SMACK!” and he hollers, “Yes!” ...Then all of a sudden he has an image of an angry Santa, turns and half heartedly hollers, “I’m Sorry.”

Suzie says, “Not as sorry as you’re GOING to be!”

In the final scene, all you see are Calvin’s feet sticking out of the snow. He says, “I think as long as you suffer for your sins, they don’t count.”

To which Hobbes replies, “It’s your only hope.”

After a much anticipated event, there is bound to be an anticlimax. That was true of Calvin’s snowball attack on little Suzie. It can also be true of Christmas. We anticipate Christmas all fall, then it is here, and then it is gone. And here we are on the day after having to face our lives, and a new year, without that intense happy anticipation.

...Calvin’s only hope was that if he suffered for his sins, they didn’t count. Our hope is the fact that Christmas is not the END of a season, but the beginning. The message of Christmas is that God IS with us. And with God with us, we are going to have a wonderful year personally and a wonderful year as a church family.

But what does it actually MEAN that God is with us? As Christians, we believe that Jesus is fully human and fully God, but how does that actually play out in the life of Jesus and how does that relate to us as followers of Jesus?

1. Pregnancy and the incarnation

An article that helped me to get some perspective on this was written Dr. Agnes Howard who is the assistant professor of English and history at Gordon College. This is an excerpt from one of her talks delivered in January of this year. Those who have given birth to a child should be particularly able to relate to this:

In the 2008 film *Baby Mama*, a successful woman goes to a surrogacy agency for help in having a baby. She is taken aback when the firm’s director describes her business as a “growth market.” Is pregnancy a mere incubation of a baby; an impersonal service that could be performed by anybody, irrelevant of whom?

The Church says no. God coming to live with us as Jesus of Nazareth, born of a woman, shows us that this Mary *MATTERS*, and the attention the Church gives to her and to her carrying the Christ Child, suggests that pregnancy matters too. In

ancient sensibilities this was scandalous. God, Who is holy, Who is Spirit, getting mixed up with the fleshly, the womanly?

These questions touch upon the mystery of the dual nature of Jesus as fully human and fully God. As some churchmen observed, God didn't have to do it this way; Jesus, the eternal second Person of the Trinity, could have come alive full grown; the second Adam, like the first Adam, coming to earth as an adult, not as a baby.

The Church fathers found it astonishing that God—consuming fire Whom the heavens cannot contain—took Mary's womb as a throne. ...Caryll Houselander's wonderful Advent book *The Reed of God* explores this theme:

Working, eating, sleeping, [Mary] was forming His body from hers... Walking in the streets of Nazareth to do her shopping, to visit her friends, she set his feet on the path to Jerusalem. Washing, kneading, weaving, sweeping, her hands prepared His hands for the nails. All her experience of the world around her was gathered to Christ growing in her.

In other words, Mary doesn't just give Jesus a warm oven to gestate in; she grants him flesh, shares her life with Him. It's not only that the baby in her womb is special; the act of the mother carrying the baby is special.

You do not just meet your baby after he/she is delivered—or even when you go for an ultrasound, or when the doctor lets you hear the heartbeat for the first time. You meet the baby in quiet moments all the time; your days and nights are shaped by the presence of this houseguest.

We get to know our children as we attend to these moments, when communication is still more touch than talk. This is worth as much reflection as we can give it. ... Let's treasure these things in our hearts: the beauty of your babies, both concealed and known; and the gift of the Savior, spoken to Mary, born for our blessing.

Jesus was, and is, God and the world was created through him. Jesus was also nursed by Mary. She taught Jesus his first words and helped him take his first steps. Jesus learned from the elders in the Temple and Joseph taught him to be a carpenter. Jesus is God and Jesus is one of us, a human being.

2. Jesus CAN touch your fate

The poem I am about to read is by Robert Frost. This poem may be experienced better by reading than by hearing, so it has been reproduced in the bulletin and I invite you to follow along if you wish. ...I chose it because it describes the inability of a human to

relate to a moth, which parallels the problem God may have had relating to a human being had God NOT become one of us. The poem is titled "To a Moth Seen in Winter".

There's first a gloveless hand warm from my pocket,
A perch and resting place 'twixt wood and wood,
Bright-black-eyed silvery creature, brushed with brown,
The wings not folded in repose, but spread.

(Who would you be, I wonder, by those marks
If I had moths to friend as I have flowers?)
And now pray tell what lured you with false hope
To make the venture of eternity
And seek the love of kind in winter time?

But stay and hear me out. I surely think
You make a labor of flight for one so airy,
Spending yourself too much in self-support.
Nor will you find love either nor love you.

And what I pity in you is something human,
The old incurable untimeliness,
Only begetter of all ills that are.

But go. You are right. My pity cannot help.
Go till you wet your pinions and are quenched.
You must be made more simply wise than I
To know the hand I stretch impulsively
Across the gulf of well nigh everything
May reach to you, but cannot touch your fate.
I cannot touch your life, much less can save,
Who am tasked to save my own a little while.

...Robert Frost could reach across the gulf of well nigh everything with his MIND and understand the moth's desire for life and love, yet he could not change its fate which was to die an untimely death in winter.

God is different. God sent Jesus to reach across the gulf of well nigh everything to understand, and experience, our desire for life and love, and Jesus CAN change our fate, which IS to die, by giving us eternal life. Jesus can do this because, like Robert Frost and like you and me, Jesus IS fully human, and yet Jesus IS also fully God.

3. The face of Jesus

There was a pop song out a few years ago, titled “If God Was One of Us” by Joan Osborne. The refrain goes:

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home?

One of the succeeding lines goes: “If God had a face what would it look like?”
...This reminds me of the text from Hebrews 13:2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” ...Jesus says that if you do kind things to the poor and needy, you do those things to him. So perhaps the face of every poor and needy person IS the face of Jesus.

Perhaps the guy in ragged clothes panhandling in Ithaca is Jesus.

Maybe the person who came to the Kitchen cupboard for food was Jesus.

Perhaps that new person who came to church one Sunday was Jesus in disguise.

It just may be that we see the face of Jesus far more often than we ever imagined.

Conclusion – Christ came down at Christmas

In our adult Sunday seminars, we just finished studying the book *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel. Lee is a lawyer and was the legal editor for the *Chicago Tribune* for many years. Then his wife became a Christian. When we saw the positive changes in HER life, he decided to study Christianity to see if Jesus COULD possibly be the Son of God. One of the things he found was this (p. 268-269):

Every other faith system I studied during my investigation was based on the “do” plan. In other words, it was necessary for people to do something—for example, use a Tibetan prayer wheel, pay alms, go on pilgrimages, undergo reincarnations, work off karma from past misdeeds, reform their character—to try to somehow earn their way back to God. Despite their best efforts, lots of sincere people just wouldn’t make it.

Christianity is unique. It's based on the "done" plan—Jesus has done for us on the cross what we cannot do for ourselves: he has paid the death penalty that we deserve for our rebellion and wrongdoing, so we can become reconciled with God.

I didn't have to struggle and strive to try to do the impossible of making myself worthy. Over and over the Bible says that Jesus offers forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift that cannot be earned (see Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). It's called grace—*AMAZING* grace, unmerited favor. It's available to anyone who receives it in a sincere prayer of repentance. Even someone like me.

God came down at Christmas. God became one of us. God spent nine months in Mary's womb, he nursed, he learned to walk and talk and he went to school to learn about the Bible and he learned to be a carpenter. And so, Jesus understands each love and fear, every hope and insecurity, each love and every illness that you face in life.

Yet because Jesus was God, Jesus promises that he will be with you in whatever you must face in this life, and Jesus promises that we will be with him in his glorious kingdom, forever and ever.

Amen.