

BEHOLDING THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

There are many ways in which we can approach the Christ-Child and the Christmas story in general.

Many of us approached it through the movie, *The Nativity*. And through it, many of us fell in love with Joseph. The reproach of the birth of Christ has captured our hearts. Why would God choose a scenario in which would bring dispute and shame upon the birth of the Son of the Highest? Why does God choose a betrothed young maiden? Why not a single girl living in Bethlehem? Why a girl from Nazareth with the suspicion of fornication? The reproach, the sting of losing our reputations is intertwined with the Christ-Child. The reproach would follow Jesus for the rest of His life (John 8:39 - 41).

Many of us fell in love with Joseph. We fell in love with a man who would lay all things down for love. He would lose his reputation, his honor, his safety, and his control for the love of Mary, the love of God, and the love of the Child - Israel's only hope. In this way Joseph becomes the perfect model for the Son of the Highest who would lay all things down for love - His reputation, His

honor, His safety, and His control. Only the inward satisfaction of pleasing the Father would comfort both Joseph and Jesus. Joseph put pressure on us all to love to the depths and to love at all times.

Mystery of Incarnation

We could also approach the Mystery of the Incarnation through a theological lens by analyzing its significance to overall purpose of redemption. The Incarnation has much theological significance and only eternity is big enough to explore the depths of what God has done in Christ Jesus.

The Incarnation secured and guaranteed the Christian revelation of God. Whoever sees the Son sees the Father. Stanley Jones, a famous missionary to India stated, "*The Incarnation is the Great Divide.*" For in Christianity, the Word became flesh. Other religions speculate about what God is like.

The Incarnation revealed the passionate, zealous, pursuing heart of God. If He will take on the human form and become a man, to what other lengths will He go? The Incarnation demonstrates the unrestrained love of Yahweh.

It secured and guaranteed Christian redemption. "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*" (2 Corinthians 5:19). When God took on flesh, He was making an emphatic statement that He would redeem humanity.

It secured and guaranteed the possibility of our regeneration and participation in the divine life. When Christ came into the world, eternal life became embodied in human form

and became a fountain of life for all who would receive Him.

The Incarnation alone secured Christian fellowship. The Body of Christ is connected by one mutually shared life. We have One Head, the same Brother. The Church is that place where someone chose Jesus and got one another.

It secured and guaranteed the Christian meaning and final outcome of history. The Incarnation makes possible a linear understanding of history. The Incarnation is the center of all history. From the sacred point of the Incarnation, faith could look forward and backward. All of human experience matters. It is not cyclical. History is moving us somewhere. It moved us to the Incarnation of Jesus and it will move us towards His return.

The Incarnation re-established human dominion on the Earth. God established His government through human beings again. What was lost in the Garden has now been restored by the person of Jesus. A human King came through Judah's line from the House of David, and will have an everlasting dominion. The image bearers, in the Incarnation, are restored to their created place.

Advent

However, more than exploring the theological depth of the Incarnation, we must do something more holy and sacred. We must do something more earthy and tangible. We must join in and do what Mary, Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and the magi did. We must ponder who this Child is and lift Him up in our arms like Simeon and weep like the shepherds who cannot figure out why the angels came to them and not the Sanhedrin. We must feel grace!

The implications of Jesus' life are always impacting us in various seasons. In fact, the church calendar is set up precisely so that the life of Jesus will ever be before us. Yes, if you are a believer, you commune with Him always by the indwelling Spirit, but His actual life instructs us on the great truths of God, ourselves, and of redemption.

Jesus' ministry reveals to us His passion for the plan of the Father, the revealing of His Father's true nature, and the freedom of humans from the oppression of sin, sickness, and devils. Passion Week and Good Friday remind us of God's commitment to judge sin, crush His Son, and offer us a free gift that we do not deserve.

But the advent and the birth of Christ do something quite different. Christmas beckons us to come closer and join in the mystery where God is close enough and small enough to get around. For Luke 2:1 – 20 says,

¹ And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³ So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because

there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold,^[b] an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill
toward men!"

¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸ And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

In the birth of Jesus God comes near. He is no longer distant. On Christmas morning God is not making a list and checking it twice. He is lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. Angels are telling shepherds of good tidings of great joy, announcing the birth of Christ the Lord, a King who happens to be the Lord Himself. Multitudes of angels burst in praise, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*" Christmas is the most popular holiday because it celebrates the generosity and approachability of God.

God is Emmanuel! God with us! For the Word became flesh!



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Standing in awe of God is one thing. Loving Him is quite another. We can go through life obedient and shuck by His awesomeness, but it's quite another thing to be struck by His tenderness, to be tender towards God. When we know His humanity and tender acquaintance with your frame, your heart feels safe to move towards Him and ask questions you normally would not ask. Sheer joy is to engage with your Brother in dialogue and in worship, free to love Him with your particular personality.

This is joy: to be safe enough to enjoy yourself in enjoying Him.

St. Alphonsus Ligouri says in the *Practice of Loving Jesus*,

"When the Son of God became man for our sake, He could have come on earth as an adult man from the first moment of His human existence. But the sight of little children draws us with an especial attraction to love them, Jesus chose to make His first appearance on earth as a little infant.

God wished to be born as a little baby in order that he might teach us to love and not to fear Him. The prophet Isaiah had long before foretold that the Son of God was to be born as an infant and thus give Himself to us on account of the love He bore us: 'A child is born to us, a son is given to us...'

My Jesus, supreme and true God! What has drawn Him from heaven to be born in a cold stable, if not the love which He has for men? What has allured Him from the bosom of His Father, to a hard manger? What has brought Him from His throne above the stars to lay down on a little straw? What has led Him from the midst of the nine choirs of angels, to set Himself between two animals?

He who set the stars in the sky in motion, now cannot move unless others carry Him in their arms! He who gives men and beasts their food, has need now of a little milk to sustain His life! He who is the joy of heaven, but now whimpers and cries in suffering! Tell me, who has reduced Him to such misery?"

The Great Mystery of the Incarnation

The Incarnation is more than just a doctrine; it is the object of contemplation. It is the place where angels and humans alike stare at a mystery as deep as the Almighty Himself. As soon as understanding enters your mind, cognition loses its grip and recedes into the abyss of non-comprehension. This is true joy – to ponder that which cannot be fully fathomed.

Paul emphatically stated that the greatness of the mystery of godliness was a non-controversial issue. Paul was not speaking as one uninformed. 2 Corinthians 12 tells us that Paul had been to the third heaven. He had seen the Lord. Yet Paul emphatically proclaimed that there was no debate around the magnitude of God becoming a man. No one gets it. Paul proclaims that both heaven and earth are in agreement concerning the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Angels are baffled and long to look into such things (1 Peter 1:12) and humans cannot fathom that which God has done.

Great is the mystery of godliness! Have we ever wondered, "*What is it about the human frame that pleased Him so much that the One who made all things could dwell in flesh?*" Jesus is not only your divine King and Maker. Now lie is your Brother. What has God done in His Son?

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What is this desire of God which resulted in the taking on of humanity for all eternity and governing as a human king? Where is the origin in the mind of God of such a scheme as the incarnation? How did it begin? How did it grow? What was the dialogue among the Trinity when, before the foundation of the world, a Lamb was slain in the heart of the majesty of heaven?

How mysterious is this plan that was birthed in the pure heart of the infinite, holy God, a perfect plan begotten by a perfect God – to have the God-Man sitting on the throne in government. Have we ever thought of that right now, that within the Trinity, there is a human body? Oh, what a great mystery! At the center of the throne dwells, a descendant of David, born from the loins of a young Jewish maiden.

This is a great mystery that design to bring us to worship, not just comprehension; it's the ecstasy of non-comprehension. This mystery has been the object of great affection throughout church history. God became man. He took on our frame for the love of us. The Church is unable to explain its depths.

The birth of the God-man has the highest mystical elements surrounding it. Angel Gabriele announces it to Mary that the Holy Spirit come upon her and the power of the Highest will overshadow her and she will conceive a child who is the Holy One, the Son of the Living God. He ends His announcement with the most wonderful words, "*For with God nothing will be impossible.*" A barren woman is pregnant with John and a virgin is pregnant with God. Angels sing, shepherds marvel, and Mary ponders. Look at Luke 2:19.

Jesus Grew

Luke goes onto tells us that Jesus was not only born with a human body, He grew up. The pondering continues. I love to imagine this. What did Jesus' awkward seasons look like? Can you imagine the time when His ears had outgrown His head and he sat through two more years of rabbinical school before His head caught up? Have you ever thought about that? He was just like you, except without sin. What did it look like when Jesus lost His first tooth and had his first haircut? What was it like when Jesus as a boy had awkwardness in each of His stages? What was it like? Luke says that the child grew and that Mary was amazed again and again. This is all we know about Jesus until we find Him at age 12 in the temple. He simply grew. He was confined to human weaknesses.

Have we ever thought of that right now, that within the Trinity, there is a human body? Oh, what a great mystery! At the center of the throne dwells, a descendant of David, born from the loins of a young Jewish maiden.

Jesus also grew in the Spirit, was the filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him. He grew mentally and spiritually. He grew. What were the stages like as He was finding out He's the unique God-Man? What was it like when His capacity mentally and spiritually got to the point where He began to have remembrance of the throne room? What was it like for Him as a human to read the Word as fully God and start to remember it?

What was it like for Him growing up when He could see all the angels around everybody else?

What was it like on the day when the Father decided that Jesus was ready to see spiritual realities? I think of his first angelic encounter. Trembling with fascination. This is reality. This is your God, and this is your King, and this is your Brother and your Groom! You can fall in love with Him! Did you know that? You really can fall in love with Him for this. We've been robbed of Jesus for far too long. It is time to ponder. It is time to enjoy the depths of His mystery and the richness of His shared life.

We have so many unfilled blanks. All we know from the Scripture is that He grew (Luke 2). He was fully God, yet He grew. He is fully man. Mary pondered these mysteries (Luke 2:19).

Max Lucado's Twenty Five Questions For Mary says,

"What was it like watching Jesus pray? How did He respond when He saw other kids giggling during the service at synagogue? When He saw a rainbow, did He ever mention a flood? Did you ever feel awkward teaching Him how He created the world? When He saw a lamb being led to the slaughter, did He act differently?"

Did you ever see Him with a distant look on His face as if He was listening to someone you couldn't hear? How did He act at funerals? Did the thought ever occur to you that the God to whom you were praying was asleep under your own roof? Did you ever try to count the stars with Him and succeed?"

Did He ever come home with a black eye? How did He act when He got His first haircut? Did He have any friends by the name of Judas? Did He do well in school? Did you ever scold Him? Did He ever have to ask a question about Scripture?"

What do you think He thought when He saw a prostitute offering to the highest bidder the body He made? Did He ever get angry when someone was dishonest with Him? Did you ever catch Him pensively looking at the flesh on His own arm while holding a clod of dirt? Did He ever wake up afraid? Who was His best friend?"

When someone referred to Satan, how did He act? Did you ever accidentally call Him Father? What did he and His cousin John talk about as kids? Did His other brothers and sisters understand what was happening? Did you ever think, 'that's God eating my soup?'"

Jesus is the hope

Luke 2:10 – 14 says,

"Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'"

This Child has much wrapped up with Him. He is the promised seed. The one prophesied from the first moment of our fall. The hopes of all the ages resting on this One. Behold, the One destined to free His people from sin and to crush the head of the serpent. The One, to ransom Adams fallen seed and usher in a kingdom of everlasting righteousness.

Today we stand post-Crucifixion and post-Easter – forgiven and filled – but the manger beckons us to come look again. It is the place where we first hoped. That God in all of His kindness could stoop so low and cast His lot in with me. The manger is the first glimpse where we believed God could take us in. The humility of it all causes us to bow but it is the tiny fingers of the King that allows our hearts to reach. If He can become like me, then just maybe He will make a way for me to become like Him. Maybe this will be good news after all – just as the angel said.

At the manger, we will lose our crankiness and our religious hardness that's built up from defending righteousness. At the manger, we will soften and begin to commune with a God who dared to come for us all. In that tender exchange He invites to dream with Him for all those who have never heard.