

## **Advent 2022**

### **The Theology of Christmas**

Summary: Jesus was more than a cute baby; He is a sin-conquering Savior.

Last week we examined the promises and prophecies that fueled the hope of the first Advent – throughout history God repeated the message that He would send a Savior, and gave increasingly specific details such as His lineage in the tribe of Judah, His birth to a virgin mother, in the city of Bethlehem. All of these things were promised through the prophets over 700 years before the birth of Christ.

We also saw these things were fulfilled as angels made announcements and John the Baptist began his ministry calling people to prepare for the coming King. And finally, we saw the promise of Christ's second coming, described in the book of Revelation and noted that throughout history the church has set aside the four Sundays before Christmas to remember that Christ has come, yes, and that means that He will also come again. And so, we look back to Bethlehem to remember what happened and then we look up and out in hope, remembering what is to come as well.

Next week we'll look at the culture of Christmas and ask how Santa is connected to Jesus and then finally, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we'll look at the events that actually happened in Bethlehem that first Christmas. Today we dig into the theology of Christmas.

You see, giving and receiving gifts is central to the celebration of Christmas. Some would say this goes all the way back to the wise men who came bringing gifts to baby Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh which are valuable spices and fragrances. That is true. But the gift giving actually started before that. Jesus Himself was a gift – from the Father to us.

So this morning I want to spend our time together asking, what does that mean? Why does it matter that He was born to a virgin? Who or what was Jesus? Was He some special religious teacher? Perhaps a very good man and a noble, charismatic leader, like Gandhi or Mother Theresa, or Nelson Mandela?

Christians have always had a very specific answer to this question. We believe that Jesus was Immanuel – God with us. He was fully God and fully man at the same time, something that is absolutely unique, unrepeated in human history. This belief, that Jesus was God, is so central to the Christian faith, that to deny it is heresy – to be outside the faith. The Apostle John warns us:

**1 John 2:1** Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether

they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

This is a dividing line issue – what you believe and confess about the nature and identity of Jesus is a very big deal and Christmas forces it all to the surface.

Christians have always believed that Advent is a season to celebrate and remember the incarnation of Christ, which is a fancy way to say God came in human flesh. And you can remember that because God is good and so is a carne asada burrito which you make by putting some carne, that is beef - grilled, never ground - in a tortilla and wrapping it up just like Mary wrapped the incarnate baby Jesus with swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger.

Every year we sing about the incarnation in Christmas carols like "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." I'm sure you've heard it, perhaps even sung along with it, but consider the words with me.

*Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King:  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"*

This song reminds us that something important was happening in that stable, Christmas is not just cute and cuddly – it's more than presents and parties and pie – something eternally significant was happening: God and sinners were being reconciled. That means two people or two parties who did not get along are being brought back together, this is what happens to us through Christ. The song goes on:

*Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with angelic hosts proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

Christmas should be full of joy, because Christ has come – not because it snowed, not because we're having eggnog with a friend we haven't seen all year, and not because we got the thing we really wanted under the tree – these things are all great and good, in fact, I hope your Christmas is blessed with all of them. But if none of these things happen, you still have the promise and presence of Christ and that's a legitimate, functional, durable source of joy. It always has been and always will be. The song continues:

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of the Virgin's womb:*

Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies and promises God made throughout the ages, remember? But it took a while: *late in time behold Him come*. Last week we saw the words of another famous Christmas Carol 'O, Holy Night' which says – *long lay the world in sin and error pining*. There were those who waited and waited *and died* without ever seeing the promise of His first Advent, the first Christmas. And so too, today, it can feel like He is late in coming *again*, for His Second Advent, but God the Father owns the clock. Christ will come again – Advent is meant to remind us of that even if it seems *late in time* to us.

*veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
hail the incarnate Deity,  
pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel.*

Here's what we've been looking for – the reminder that Jesus was God in the flesh – Carne Christada – or, the way they would have expressed that in Hebrew, Immanuel – God with us.

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings.*

There is reference here to the resurrection, *risen with healing in his wings*. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. Now think about this - that would only be possible with the flesh of a human body. He was raised to life again by the Father and now offers the same resurrection to us. For all of this, we should praise Him, we should *hail* Him as *the heaven-born Prince of Peace and the Sun of Righteousness!*

At Christmas we put lights and candles everywhere – to remind us that Christ was the light in the darkness. His coming brings *light and life* to us. This is what is meant to happen. This is how the True Christmas is meant to function. So, I have to ask: would you describe your life, right now, as full of *light and life*? God offers them to you – He's *bringing* them to you, hand-delivering them in the person of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us – so turn to Him and find what you need today.

*Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that man no more may die,*

*born to raise us from the earth,  
born to give us second birth.*

We get one final reference here to God becoming man – *Mild he lays His glory by.* Jesus set aside His divine glory, power, and prerogatives in a way no one has ever fully understood in order to walk, talk, eat, drink, sleep, and suffer, as a man – all so that we might no longer *die*, risen *from the earth*, born again, through a *second birth*. This is what Advent is all about, this is why and how Christ came.

Ya'll, I don't know what your favorite style of music is, but that's a song worth singing.

Of course, we don't anchor our lives in songs, no matter how good, or how old they are. We anchor them in Scripture, God's revealed word to us. So, turn with me to Matthew and let's see where Charles Wesley got some of the ideas he wove into this great song.

**Matthew 1:18** Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

Betrothal was like being engaged. It was public information and everyone assumed the next step would be marriage as soon as everything and everyone was ready. So, these two young people – Mary and Joseph - are committed to each other, but not married yet, and she turns up pregnant and Joseph knows it's not his. We've got a problem.

**19** Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

Here we find an example of a truly good man. He knows this situation is not right – so he's going to break things off, but he's not going to trash her in the process. He's going to take a stand for himself and for what is right, but do it in a way that's discrete. So too, you can do the right thing, you can take a stand for yourself, but you can do it in a way that doesn't escalate the situation or expose other people any more than is necessary.

Of course, it turns out there was more going on than Joseph was aware of at first.

**20** But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. **21** And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

Have you ever received a gift and had to navigate that awkward experience of not knowing exactly what it is or what it's for or why someone would have given it to you? Well, here you learn *exactly* why Jesus is given to us – [He saves us from our sins](#). That's a pretty good deal and no batteries or assembly required.

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 23 *“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,”* which is translated, “God with us.”

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

Here is the mystery of the incarnation: that Jesus Christ, born of Mary, in Bethlehem, was fully God and fully man. Both. Simultaneously. We may be unclear about *how* it worked exactly, but Scripture is exceedingly clear about the fact that it did with hundreds of references to Jesus as Lord and God along with explicit statements like this:

**Colossians 1:19** For it pleased *the Father that in Him [Jesus] all the fullness should dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.*

Christ's identity as both fully God and fully man, is so central to the Christian faith that it has been agreed upon by all true Christians, regardless of denomination, all around the world, all throughout the history of the Church. It is a fundamental Christian doctrine professed and proclaimed throughout the ages.

Hundreds of years ago, long before spoken word artists were a thing, one Christian marveled about this central fact of the faith writing:

Who could have imagined that God should become man, infinite become finite, the Creator a creature; the Father of spirits become flesh, and the Lord of life be put to death? Who could conceive, that he who made all things of nothing, should be made himself of a woman, made by him? That he whom the heavens, and heaven of heavens cannot contain, should be contained in the narrow womb of a woman? That the only bread of life should be hungry, the only water of life be thirsty; the only rest be weary, the only ease be pained, and the only joy and consolation be sorrowful, exceeding sorrowful unto death?

Who could have imagined that one, yea, millions, should be rich by another's poverty, filled by another's emptiness, be exalted by another's disgrace, healed by another's wounds, eased by another's pains, be absolved by

another's condemnation, and live eternally by another's temporal death?

This is what Christ has done for us. And this is why we celebrate Advent – to remember, that Christ has come – God took on flesh and came to us - and Christ will come again.

Well, we have said that Jesus was fully God, and I think that is easy to accept. But the truth is that He was also fully man. And, oddly enough, there doesn't seem to have been anything outwardly extraordinary about Him. You probably wouldn't have been able to pick Him out of a crowd. Judas had to kiss Him on the night He was arrested so the soldiers would know, with all the disciples standing around, which one was actually Jesus?

Scripture clearly tells us He lived very much like a human being. He grew up as an infant. He experienced hunger and thirst. He was physically tired from travel and work. He was moved emotionally and even cried. He felt grief and was furious with righteous anger. On top of it all, He experienced suffering and death.

Yes, it is hard for us to understand at times, but Jesus was absolutely human.

One of my memories of Christmas growing up was watching *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. It's actually a book written by Barbara Robinson that was turned into a made for TV movie and you can watch the entire thing on YouTube if you're up for a fun flashback to the 80's. It's the story of a church putting on their annual Christmas pageant and all the glitches that keep popping up threatening to turn the whole thing into a disaster.



Central to the struggle is the fact that a family of kids that everyone views as hooligans have volunteered to take on the central roles of the play. Imogene Herdman wants to be Mary, a role no one can picture her playing – which, without spoiling the ending for you if you haven't seen or read it, is part of the hinge on which the story turns.

I say all of that to share with you this – during the play, on Christmas Eve, in front of a crowded church, Imogene, this rough and tumble girl from the wrong side of town is holding the doll that's meant to be the baby Jesus. Two girls, one named Alice, the other the narrator who is telling the story, watch what's happening:

*Imogene had the baby doll but she wasn't carrying it in the way she was supposed to, cradled in her arms. She had it slung up over her shoulder, and*

*before she put it in the manger she thumped it twice on the back. I heard Alice gasp and she poked me. "I don't think it's very nice to burp the baby Jesus," she whispered, "as if he had colic."*

*Then she poked me again. "Do you suppose he could have had colic?"*

*I said, "I don't know why not," and I didn't. He could have had colic, or been fussy, or hungry like any other baby. After all, that was the whole point of Jesus - that he didn't come down on a cloud - like something out of "Amazing Comics," but that he was born and lived ... a real person.*

We don't always think of it that way, but Jesus was *a real person*. He was fully God and fully human, even as a baby.

If you want to scramble your brain sometime, think of this: Jesus never became more God. He was - in Mary's womb, in the manger, at the Sermon on the Mount, and on the cross - the very fullness of God. Mary was pregnant with Jesus for nine months, and during that entire time, the child inside her was real, and really God - from conception to birth. Which, by the way, validates all of life, from the womb to the tomb - human beings have inherent worth, dignity, and value. Jesus was never just a clump of cells. He was never just human tissue. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was fully God and fully man during the full course of Mary's pregnancy as well as the full course of His life on earth.

In fact, the completely natural pregnancy and birth of this supernatural child emphasizes the dual nature of Christ helping us see: He was fully man, *born to a woman*, but also fully God, *conceived by the Holy Spirit*.

There's really no better way for it happen. For example, if Jesus had come down from heaven fully formed, with no human parents, even if He looked and seemed exactly like a man, we would always question whether or not He really was and therefore, whether He could actually represent us, comfort us, and understand us.

But, if He had been born to two parents and then somehow His divine nature was joined to that otherwise 'normal' person, we would never be entirely sure of his divinity - we'd say well, He was sure a really good man, perhaps even a very godly man, maybe we'd recognize Him as a prophet or saint, but we would struggle to accept that He was actually divine.

Neither option is impossible, but God in His wisdom, choose the virgin birth to help us see as clearly as possible: Jesus is both God and man.

Interestingly - the Bible is not concerned with answering all our questions about exactly how this happened - we don't get a flow chart or documentary film or slide

deck. Instead, we find the Scripture spending far more time on the three years of Jesus' public ministry and especially the final week of His life.

Similarly, the Bible opens with these exact words:

**Genesis 1:1** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

God doesn't answer all our questions about how exactly this happened either, He just reports that it did. You can accept it or not.

But you have to ask: if people *could* know exactly *how* Jesus was fully God and fully Man, exactly *how* He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary, or exactly *how* He created the world and how long it took, if they could understand the process fully and have every question answered, then would they believe? I don't think so.

Throughout human history, both in and out of Scripture, people have seen countless miracles, experienced them up close, and still walked away from the God who performed them. The fundamental human problem is not our lack of understanding, it's our lack of surrender. We don't want to accept what we *do* know and understand, so we look for convenient excuses to buy ourselves more time without committing to a particular theological position.

Meanwhile, Advent reminds us of what God *has* done in order to make it possible for us to know Him personally. Christmas is an invitation to receive a gift from God, a gift better than any you could give, or receive. It's an invitation to know Christ personally. To hear the Holy Spirit say – this is what God has done for you.

My friends can you marvel, can you be stunned, can you provoked to gratitude and worship by the fact that God has done this, for you? He has come to earth become fully God and fully man to ensure your full salvation.

There was nothing in it for Him, in fact, it cost Him everything, it involved suffering and sadness and death, it meant setting aside His divine rights and prerogatives, to bring you salvation. So now, will you accept it? Will you receive it? And if you've already done so, will you stay focused on it? Will you allow this Advent season to remind you: Christ has come. Christ will Come Again. He is Immanuel, God with us?

This morning we celebrate that reality by turning our attention to communion. We receive tangible reminders of a spiritual truth – a cup that reminds us of the blood of Christ shed on the cross for our sins, a cup that could not exist if He were not a real man. And a broken piece of bread that reminds us of His broken body, a sacrifice made for us – a sacrifice that could not have been accepted if He had not lived an utterly perfect life. These two things remind us of all that Jesus has done for us, all that God has given to us, and help us focus our hearts on the real purpose of



Advent – He came for our salvation, He will come again as our King. He is Immanuel – God with us.

Let's pray.

## Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

### Advent 2022 The Theology of Christmas

Summary: Jesus was more than a cute baby; He is a sin-conquering Savior.

- What is one of your favorite gifts you've received at Christmas? What is one of your favorite things you remember giving at Christmas?
- Is it more difficult for you to believe that Jesus is fully God or to believe that He is fully man? Why?
- Hark the Herald Angels Sing joyfully proclaims deep theological truths. What do the following lines mean to you? How have they impacted your life?
  - *Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King:  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"*
  - *Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
*risen with healing in his wings.**
- In what ways is the idea of Immanuel, God with us, helpful to navigating your life? How do you experience or encounter God, how do you become more aware of His presence? Are there times when you are more aware of His presence than other times?
- Why do we think that knowing exactly how God did things like the incarnation or creation would help us, or others, believe?
- To explore more of what Scripture reveals about the incarnation examine the following passages. What stands out to you?
  - John 1:1-14
  - Romans 1:2-5
  - Philippians 2:6-11

- Hebrews 2:14
- 1 John 1:1-3