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PROPHECIES OF THE MESSIAH

Dec 19, 2021 4th of ADVENT

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## I saw a cute Facebook post from a friend in Oregon - she was interviewed for her local TV station, because she got snowed in at her university and had to sleep in her office. So she shouted out to her students, and a guy with a 4-wheel drive vehicle came and got her - and called the TV station because he thought it was cool to rescue his teacher. Anyway, she is a younger woman, but smart as a whip, and I’m glad to share a favorite doctrine with her - the doctrine of Incarnation. (Don’t often see “favorite” and “doctrine” in the same word….)

 None of the prophets who expected and talked about God’s Messiah expected what actually happened - Incarnation - that God came among us as a human person, Jesus. The prophecies we read a few moments ago caught elements like Bethlehem, a young woman giving birth, and that this blessing will come to the world through Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebecca, and Javob & Rachel. But no one expected Incarnation!

 “Incarnation” is a fancy theological name for our Christian doctrine trying to explain how God took on flesh…. how the divine, powerful, eternal God took on limited, human, somewhat powerless mortality. The term comes from the Latin ‘carn’, meaning flesh, like our other words carnal, carnage, carnivorous, reincarnation and such. So “incarnation” has to do with “Coming into flesh.”

A similar word floating around these recent computer days is “avatar”, where people design a digital version of themselves to act in video games, or now, to wave at you in Facebook. People take a form so they can enter into the digital world. There was even a movie called Avatar a few years ago, where a guy goes into this machine which gives him a body that the planet’s inhabitants can relate to. Of course, his ulterior purpose was to spy on them, but in a plot twist, he begins to identify with them, value and love them, and even fight on their behalf by the ending. Interestingly, the word “avatar” has a religious origin - in our class about world religious traditions, we ran into that word from the Sanskrit, in Hinduism, describing gods entering into a human form, For example, Krishna is an avatar for Vishnu.

I have to admit I get a bit upset at the electronic folks taking over good religious words like ‘avatar’ and ‘icon,’ and making them bywords of the computer era. These words have a long religious meaning.

So when we use the word “incarnate” or “incarnation” as a Christian doctrine, its way bigger than computer games and movies - this is the Holy One of Israel coming among us humans to reveal just who that same Holy One is, and to teach once again the words of God, and to call people once again to be restored to fellowship with God. And God does it because God so loves the world. God has a mission to speak words of peace and reconciliation to us, we who have gone our own way and made a mess of things. God is telling us in Jesus about God’s ultimate purposes of human persons and all creation. This is love being communicated. This is Life calling us back to who we are created to be. This is Love arranging for our forgiveness and restoration, because we can’t do that for ourselves. And it's costly. Jesus let go, didn’t cling to the privileges of divinity, in order to do this humbling thing. The prophetic concept of the Messiah as a Deliverer of people turns out to be a much larger concept than anticipated.

It’s hard to wrap our minds around the concept that Jesus could be both fully God and fully human. It’s why Jesus is called the Christ, and why we are called Christians. It's where the name Christmas comes from. It’s probably easier to see Jesus as human when we think of being carried by Mary, birthed in the usual human way, being in a small town family, raised in a specific culture, and never really traveling far from his home. We love our babies already - they are our future, our reason for protecting this planet home, our reason to seek shelter and security, our reason to get up and go on. Providing for them is a survival thing and hardwired in us. Babies inspire us - just ask someone about their kids or grandkids - that will show how vital they are to us!

So the baby Jesus touches a lot of cords in us; we celebrate God in human flesh, God doing what it takes to reach us, God suffering the indignities of babyhood and later even adolescence. And God doing this to speak in a way we will understand. I know what I’ve been willing to do for my kids and grandkids - God has to feel AT LEAST that way about us.

Later, when Jesus is doing miracles and teaching some hard things, we might find it more difficult to affirm him as fully human - we don’t usually have the ability to calm storms or walk on water, or make water into wine. We see the Divine side of Jesus more as he is an adult. Nonetheless, the doctrine of incarnation insists that in Jesus, the divine and flesh are joined together, matter and spirit are joined as one, soul and body are a great unity.

So in a way, Jesus’ incarnation gives the lie to all the bad ways religion has tried to tell us that flesh is bad - that we need to abandon our bodies to be more spiritual, that the physical is somehow less than the spiritual. If God was willing to incarnate as a human, then it’s good for us, too, to be fully creatures of this world, to be embodied, to be a part of this earth where the kingdom of God is come. We pray for that every time we repeat the Lord’s Prayer. And actually, the very first of our holy writings, in its very first chapter, says that God called the creation of male and female, GOOD.

In the past, devout religious folks have been misled into subjecting their bodies to all kinds of neglect and torture and punishments, thing they were strengthening their spiritual lives. Yet the Scripture calls our b bodies Temples of the Holy Spirit, because God’s Spirit indwells us. Something about humanity involves being bodies.

We could make a good argument that if God cared enough to take on human flesh and live in this world, that we do not need to be ashamed and put down our bodies. Jesus was able to live as both human and Divine - can’t we then, seek to bring together the spiritual and flesh in our own bodies? The apostle Paul often refers to us, the Church, as the very body of Christ now, carrying on Christ’s mission as followers and disciples. The Spirit of God can fill us and move us to live on this planet and also live in Christ’s kingdom, a realm of justice, peace, compassion, a place of caring for the needs of body and spirit.

So when we talk about making room in our hearts for Jesus this Christmas, this is what we’re talking about - that we, like Mary, may birth the Christ into the world; that we like Jesus will live in this body as a Temple of the Holy Spirit, caring the presence of God and the mason of God into this world. AMEN.

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