

AND DWELT AMONG US

HEBREWS 10: 5-10; LUKE 1: 39-45

DECEMBER 21, 2003

THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I love that story of a colleague who serves as a campus minister. He tells about a student who came to him one day concerned that he was losing his faith. “What do you mean,” asked the campus minister. “I mean I no longer believe in the Virgin Birth,” the student replied. “Do I have to believe in the Virgin Birth to be a Christian,” he asked.

Giving a Zen-like response, the campus minister said, “In one sense no, but in another sense yes, you do. We ask you to believe in the virginal conception of Jesus and, if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there’s no telling what someone can get you to believe.

Come back next week and we’ll try to convince you that the poor are royalty and the rich are in big trouble, that God, not nations, rules the world, and on and on. We start you out with something fairly small, like the Virgin Birth, then work you up to even more outrageous assertions.”ⁱ

When I heard that story it opened the door just a crack. The door on my way of seeing the world and confirming what is true and not true.

For most of us that door is called reason; good, old-fashioned, common sense, reason. This way of looking at things began a long time ago when the French philosopher Descartes said that the only way we can know anything is if we first doubt its existence and then prove its existence by the tools of science and reason.

A century later another French philosopher by the name of Comte said that if we use our reason appropriately we can figure everything out, we can create a perfect world. His philosophy was popular until about 1914 when the world became mired in war. But I think our modern society is back in the grip of the French philosophers.

Today’s story from Luke challenges the way we understand some of the most basic principles of our faith.

I like what theologian Karl Barth said in the middle of the 20th century. He said, “the incarnation is inconceivable but it is not absurd.” What Barth means is that “we may not understand the Virgin Birth and the incarnation of Jesus but that does not preclude it from having meaning for us.”ⁱⁱ

There are lots of things we don’t understand but they still function in our lives and we marvel at them – how a computer works; or how geese, say, can find their way back each year to precise migration points thousands of miles apart. I don’t understand the precise chemistry of it but when I hold my wife’s hand I know I feel deep bondedness, well-being and trust.

Debating the reasonableness of the Virgin Birth – whether the Virgin Birth is a miracle or a metaphor – is little bit like debating whether it is the wood or glue that gives a Stradivarius violin its sublime sound. Instead, what I’d like us to do this morning is listen to the sublime music of the Word made flesh that came to dwell among us.

Someone said the essence of the incarnation is not just that God is with us but that God gets involved with us.

In other words, our faith is a two-way street because of the incarnation. Because God came to us in a peasant baby and grew into a mature adult who some call a revolutionary leader and others claim, more than any other human, changed the course of history.

Lutheran pastor Paul Scherer commenting on the incarnation, the Word made flesh says, “What is the glory of God? It is the majesty that had no where to lay its head; the grandeur that was meek and lowly; the splendor of a lonely wanderer weary and footsore with nails through his hands and feet. I have found in and through him all the God I want. Nothing less than that – all that I know of God. I do not say that I have learned it from him, I say that I have seen it in him.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Scherer notes an important difference here: seeing takes us beyond learning. This past week our wonderful regional Hyde School parents group met in Rochester. We are members of the group through the Hyde School where our son Douglas is a student.

We come from Ithaca, Syracuse and Buffalo. The theme of the meeting was integrity. One of the exercises was to share with the group a person of integrity that has been important in your life.

It was a helpful exercise. We didn’t stop with just defining integrity which, someone said, was when your words and actions are aligned. Rather we talked about people in whom we could see integrity. Several people came to mind. It was interesting to me that they all had flaws. But there was, in each one, an unmistakable correspondence between what they said and what they did. For me, the blessing of knowing these people is that they showed me what integrity looks like.

That’s what Pastor Scherer is getting at when he says he sees in Jesus everything he needs to know about God.

Jesus surrendered his will to God’s will as if to say, “Here, look at this, this is who God is! God stoops to wash feet, spends time with the refuse of society, takes on the arrogant, powerful authorities.”

The incarnation tells us everything important about God.

There’s another way to see it too.

We got a lovely Christmas card from friends who have a little place on the coast of Maine. The card is of a painting of the Maine coast in winter. It is realistic. It is not a photograph – it is not perfect in that sense. But the painting evokes accurately and powerfully what I know of the Maine coast in winter – stark, crisp, muted colors, raw nature. Holding that Christmas card in my hand, looking at the painting, I felt as if I was standing on the rocks at Wiscasset Beach. I was there!

Jesus was not perfect in the sense of being a photograph of God. Jesus was perfect in the sense of evoking God’s presence to a sick person, a struggling rich man, a religious leader searching for new truth.

You can see where this is leading – God getting into the nitty/gritty of your life. Through Jesus we experience God embracing the human situation. Not just subjecting himself to blisters and diarrhea. But getting involved with real human suffering.

At Christmas we celebrate God with us, involved with you and me, coming to us in our human condition. Is it a wayward teenager? An old wound that festers in your soul? An illness that has you confronting your mortality for the first time at a deeper level?

When we look to Jesus and invite Jesus into a particular corner of our lives where we are struggling it is like looking at that painting of Maine in winter. I can't explain it or put it into words – but when you look to Jesus from whatever your condition, God is there comforting, teaching, leading you toward life.

The message of Advent is that God comes to us to get involved with us.

Not just on Sunday mornings when the music is glorious and the windows are exquisite. But in the middle of the night when you are anxious about your health or your marriage or just where your life is or isn't going at present.

In those moments of life when you are the woman reaching for the hem of Jesus' robe; or the rich, young ruler seeking answers that last; or the Roman centurion begging that your daughter might live.

Advent and Christmas point directly and unequivocally to Good Friday and Easter.

It is no small theological problem that Christmas has eclipsed Easter on the Christian calendar. When we sentimentalize Christmas we miss God getting involved. We keep the manger cute and irrelevant.

No. The Christ child comes to rescue sinners, to heal broken relationships. To give sight to those who just don't get it yet. To bring peace where there is anxiety and worry and fear.

You might remember the god of the French philosophers. They called their god, "the watchmaker." A god who gets things started but for whom there is no need in the human family after creation is begun.

So God sits back and creation goes ticking along like a watch said Descartes and Comte. Or, in my opinion, if this is the god one subscribes to – life goes ticking along waiting for some crisis or even 'reasonableness' itself to destroy it.

There is nothing reasonable about the Virgin Birth. It is inconceivable. Is it the quid pro quo for faith? Of course not. But on second thought who knows?

If you can believe it – there is no telling what else you might believe about God. "Behold!" said Jesus. "I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come to you and eat with you, and you with me."

Listen! The doorbell is ringing. Who will answer? Amen.

ⁱ William Willimon, "Pulpit Resource," 10/03-12/03, 50.

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Oxford: T&T Clark, 1936) I/2, 160.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Scherer, *Love Is a Spendthrift* (New York: Harper, 1961) 16-17.