



Today

Nov/Dec 2022

refresh, refocus, renew

Wonders OF THE *Incarnation*

ALSO: THE JESUS-MEAL

Friends:

On the night before he died for us, Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave pieces to his disciples. Then he passed around a cup of wine for everyone to share. With this “last meal,” Jesus established a reminder and assurance that all who share this communion meal in memory of him belong to him and to each other.



During November, Pastor Kristopher Walhof, who trains pastors in rural Kenya, leads us in exploring the Lord's Supper. We discover in these meditations the hidden depths of Jesus' sacrifice for us. They remind us that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, Jesus comforts and challenges us to be his body in this world.

And, fittingly, as we celebrate Christmas in December, Pastor Bob Arbogast explores with us the meaning of the *incarnation*. This unusual word refers to Jesus, the Son of God, coming to live among us “in the flesh.” Jesus became one of us, a human being, and he was like us in every way. He needed food and sleep. He had muscle aches and headaches. He also experienced joy, sorrow, frustration, and anger—and yet he did not sin. Jesus was both fully God *and* fully human, and he is the only one who can save us from sin and death. Celebrating Jesus in this way, we can fully experience the joy of Christmas.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

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"The Jesus-Meal"
Kristopher Walhof



"Wonders of the Incarnation"
Bob Arbogast

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ReFrame
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december

Wonders of the Incarnation

Bob Arbogast

In December we celebrate the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Think of it. The eternal Son of God takes on human flesh. The almighty, everlasting God becomes “like [us], fully human in every way” (Hebrews 2:17). That’s a wondrous and wonderful thing, and it gives us plenty to wonder about together this month.

Bob Arbogast is the pastor of Celebration Fellowship church in Ionia, Michigan. In his spare time he plays guitar in a West Michigan blues band. He and his wife, Jan, have three adult daughters.

ANNUNCIATION

"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."
—Luke 1:31

No one expected it—not Joseph, and certainly not Mary. A child before marriage. A son conceived without having sex, however that might work. He would be a holy child, someone set apart to God. He would be the Son of God, whatever that might mean. That's what the angel told Mary.

Naturally, Mary asked how this would happen. The angel said the Holy Spirit would come upon her. Who ever heard of such a thing? Joseph and Mary expected that any child they might have would be a gift from God. But they sure didn't expect this.

Though their son would be conceived in an extraordinary way, he would be born in the usual way. He would eat and sleep in the usual way. He would grow up in the usual way. And he would learn the family trade in the usual way.

For a long time, there wouldn't be much unusual about their son. Not until the Holy Spirit, who would come upon Mary, would also descend on their son (Luke 3:22). The Spirit would send their son on a mission to be the Savior of the world.

That mission would unfold in ways no one expected. But their son would keep moving forward. With a generous heart, with a courageous spirit, and with toughened soles, he would stick to the path of that mission for the glory of God.

Jesus, you are the pioneer and perfecter of faithfulness. Your feet walked the path ahead of us. May our feet keep moving as we walk along behind you. Amen.

UNUSUAL BABY

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. . . .

—Luke 2:7

At the very heart of Christmas we find a rag-wrapped baby lying in a makeshift crib. By itself, that's not so unusual. Babies show up when and where they happen to be born. Mothers have to deal with it, ready or not. And they do, whether the baby is delivered in a hospital, in a taxicab, or on a kitchen floor.

What's unusual here is not the rags. Mary improvised, using what was available. And what's unusual is not the manger. That was just a smart solution to an urgent need. No, what's unusual here is the baby himself.

Now, this baby has the usual number of fingers and toes. You just know that Mary counts them. This baby has the usual smooth, soft skin. You just know that Mary adores his little cheeks. And this baby makes all the usual sounds: coos and gurgles and wails.

You just know that Mary takes in these sounds as sweet music.

What's unusual about this baby is not his actual flesh and blood, not his appearance, not his behavior. No, what's unusual about this baby is the identity veiled by his helpless human form. Because this baby is the God "through [whom] all things were made" (John 1:3). This is a wonder.

Son of Mary, help us to wonder as we wander through your story this month. Deepen our faith as we encounter your genuinely human glory. Amen.

THE HUMAN WORD

The Word became flesh. . . .

—John 1:14

It sounds simple: “The Word became flesh.” In other words, the Word became human, as ordinary as any of us. That sounds simple enough—until we know who the Word is. Then it becomes simply astonishing.

John fills in the blanks for us. He starts with the timeless existence of the Word: “In the beginning was the Word.” Then he connects the timeless Word with God: “The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Next John relates the divine Word to creation: “Through him all things were made.” But that’s not all. The Word is also the source of all human flourishing: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” And the Word is unconquerable: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

All of this is big-deal stuff. And this amazing, extraordinary Word becomes flesh, becomes Jesus. The timeless, life-giving Creator of all becomes as ordinary as any of us. There’s nothing simple about that. And it remains a great mystery.

But here is something especially amazing. When the Word becomes flesh, the glory of God becomes visible in a new way: “The Word became flesh. . . . We have seen his glory. . . .” Just imagine—a human being shining with the glory of God. How wonderful is that?

Jesus, you are the Word of God, and yet you are as ordinary as we are. That is so amazing! Jesus, show us what it really means to be human. Amen.

THE MUTED WORD

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

—Genesis 1:3

In the Bible the human story begins with a man, and then a woman. The human story of Jesus begins with a woman, Mary. And then Jesus himself begins, as a baby.

It's wonderful to picture baby Jesus all wrapped up and in Mary's arms. But think about this. Jesus is the eternal Word, the Word through whom everything was made, the Word that said, "Let there be . . ." But now the Word is a human being, a newborn baby. Do we realize what this means? It means the Word can't speak anymore.

Like any newborn, baby Jesus doesn't know language yet. He will need to listen first—especially to his mother, and also to his father. Slowly he will discover that words have meaning. Eventually he'll start to speak for himself. He'll know only a few words at first:

"Immah" (mother) and "Abba" (father). And then a flood of words will come, and it won't stop. Like most mothers, Mary will sometimes wish Jesus had never started talking!

Imagine. The Word that spoke in the beginning loses its voice. It has to go back to the beginning that we experience as humans. And it has to learn the same way we did, one word at a time.

Language is a wonderful gift. And Jesus shares it with us.

Jesus, to whom should we turn, but to you? "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). You are the Word, who is life. Amen.

POOR JESUS

Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.

—2 Corinthians 8:9

The apostle Paul says Jesus was rich. Of course. He was God, after all. But it's not that God has a fat bank account or lives on a private island. So perhaps Paul means "rich" in some other way. And when he says Jesus became poor, does that mean "poor" in some other way, some unusual way?

Luke describes a time when the whole family went to Jerusalem. Jesus was about six weeks old. It was time for Mary to offer a pair of post-childbirth sacrifices at the temple. The usual offerings were a lamb and a pigeon (or maybe a dove). But instead Mary offered either "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." And that was okay, because there was a special allowance for families that couldn't afford a lamb. So Joseph and Mary and Jesus must have been poor—in the usual way.

I wonder what that meant for Jesus. I wonder what he experienced growing up poor.

One thing that often goes with poverty is food insecurity. Plenty of people go to bed hungry. Maybe you do. Did Jesus know that kind of hunger, the hunger that comes from not having enough food, that comes from being poor? Is that why he taught his disciples to pray for "daily bread"—because in his experience, hunger was never far away? I wonder.

Jesus, you know what it means to be poor and hungry. You know what some of us know very well, but that many of us can only imagine. No wonder we're hungry for you. Amen.

AN ARMFUL OF HOPE

Simeon took him in his arms. . . .

—Luke 2:28

When Jesus was about six weeks old, an old man cradled him in his arms. In some ways that seems such an ordinary thing to do. It's what many of us want to do with a little baby—to hold that bundle of new life close, to hear the breath, to feel the warmth, to gaze into the bright, wondering eyes.

The old man has high hopes for this helpless baby. Somehow this baby will shine with glory in the midst of his own people, Israel. And he will be the way out of darkness for all peoples (Genesis 12:3). He will be salvation from God, salvation so desperately needed in a world of sin and sorrow.

These hopes and expectations did not come to the old man out of nowhere. The Spirit of God had been speaking in his heart, giving him hope that he would see the Messiah, the

King of Israel. And when the Spirit prompted him, he went to the temple. And there he saw a baby, just a baby.

But instantly the old man Simeon knew. He knew that God's great rescue plan centered on this child. He knew that somehow this powerless infant, who couldn't talk or walk yet, would be the answer to the world's greatest need. And that child is still the answer today.

Jesus, we don't expect much from little babies, though we do have our hopes and dreams for them. But what dreams your heavenly Father had for you! Amen.

LIKE US IN EVERY WAY

He had to be made like them, fully human in every way. . . .

—Hebrews 2:17

In the Christmas song “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” we might recognize the words “veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity.” And if we’re in a thoughtful mood, we might wonder at the mystery of the Word becoming flesh, of God becoming one of us.

In a sermon years ago, I quoted from a song called “One of Us.” In its own way, the song wonders about the incarnation: “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us?” I got in trouble for that. I was told, “God is not a slob!” Well, of course not.

Yet there is something scandalous about the incarnation, isn’t there?

We know what it’s like to be embodied creatures. Sure, there’s the “glory and honor” of being human (Psalm 8:5):

the beauty and strength and intelligence. But there’s also the other side: the homeliness, the weakness, the aches and pains. And there’s the harsh truth that sometimes we are slobs.

That’s why we can’t imagine God really becoming one of us. God is lovely and lofty, perfect and pure. How could such a God get mixed up in the mess of being human, as human as any of us? But that’s the truth and the scandal of the incarnation. The eternal Son of God abandons the perfections of divinity to take on the flaws of humanity. And he does it out of love.

Jesus, we can hardly imagine what you gave up to take on what we know in our bones. But that’s what you did for us, and we are amazed. Amen.

THE BOY JESUS

Jesus grew in wisdom.

—Luke 2:52

Twelve-year-old Jesus scares the wits out of his parents. And no wonder. They think they've lost him—the holy child that God entrusted to them!

After three days, they find Jesus at the temple. He's sitting there with the teachers: listening and learning, asking questions and giving answers. And everyone is amazed.

Of course they're amazed. Jesus is God. He knows more than any of those teachers. He knows *everything*. That's what we might think. But that really won't do. What's going on here is that Jesus is amazing for a twelve-year-old.

Something else is going on too. When Jesus' parents find him at the temple, Mary scolds him: "How could you do this to us?" But Jesus doesn't get it: "You should have known I would be at the temple."

Twelve-year-old Jesus has a problem. He hasn't figured out how to put together his sense of obligation to his heavenly Father with his obligations to his earthly father and mother. There's nothing wrong with that, nothing sinful about it. It's simply beyond the wisdom of a twelve-year-old—even the *twelve-year-old Jesus*—to know how to balance those competing obligations.

That's okay. Jesus won't be twelve forever. And as he grows up, he will grow in wisdom.

It's not easy being twelve. We know so much and understand so little. And we can't wait to grow up. Jesus, you know all about growing up. Help us to grow up in you. Amen.

JESUS THE BUILDER

Isn't this the carpenter?

—Mark 6:3

The gospel books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) focus on Jesus' public ministry. For a period of three years he taught about the kingdom of God, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and even raised the dead. But before any of that, for about thirty years, Jesus lived in the family home. And for most of those years, he worked alongside his father Joseph in the family trade.

We think of Joseph as a carpenter, someone who worked with wood. But he may have been a stoneworker. The original language is not clear. What is clear is that Joseph was a builder of some sort. So he worked with his hands and with tools: perhaps making farm implements and furniture, or laying foundations. And Jesus did the same thing for probably about twenty years. The gospel books barely mention it. But they do give us that much.

Now, when Jesus began his teaching ministry, people for miles and miles around came to know him as a teacher and wonder-worker. They were in awe of him. But to the people in his hometown, he was just a guy who worked with tools in his hands. They couldn't get beyond that.

We have the opposite problem. We know Jesus as the Son of God. And we can lose sight of his genuine humanity. But for most of his years, Jesus lived a life as ordinary as anyone's, like yours or mine.

Jesus, you are the holy Son of God, and we praise you. You are also the ordinary son of Joseph, with tools in your hands—and to us that is wonderful. Amen.

TEMPTED

Jesus the Son of God . . . has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.
—Hebrews 4:14-15

Hebrews 4 says that Jesus was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Do we believe that? Oh, we can believe the “he did not sin” part. But do we believe that he was “tempted . . . just as we are”?

We know what temptation is all about—from the temptation to tell little lies as children, to the temptation to give in to our surging hormones as teenagers, to the temptation to turn a blind eye to racism as adults. Was Jesus really tempted the same way we are?

Well, Jesus did have teenage hormones. And he probably noticed all the pretty girls in Nazareth. Maybe he even thought about being in love with one of them. But he didn’t let desire get the better of him and lead him into sexual sin.

Another temptation we face comes from money. Jesus had a lot to say about that. But before he said any of those things, Jesus had worked with his hands and had been paid for his labors. He had learned the value of money and the good it could do to provide for his household. But he didn’t let money rule his life.

Maybe when we’re tempted, we can imagine how Jesus would handle it, and we can try to do the same thing. We can also ask for his help. (See 1 Corinthians 10:13.)

Jesus, it’s hard for us to believe that you were tempted. Temptation can be overwhelming for us, and we often give in. At times, we can hardly imagine *not* giving in. Please, Jesus, help us. Amen.

BECOMING MESSIAH

"Who made you ruler and judge over us?"

—Exodus 2:14

Moses grew up comfortably while his own people were slaves (Exodus 2). One day he tried to break up a fight between two of those slaves. And one of them said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" We might say, "That's easy—God did. Moses was God's appointed leader over Israel." But Moses was actually jumping the gun. Because God would not appoint him till after another 40 years!

We tend to jump the gun when it comes to Jesus. We are often too impatient to let him be a human being as ordinary as any of us. For example, when he is young, we think of him as Israel's Messiah. But Jesus will not be the Messiah for another 30 years.

Don't worry. This doesn't take anything away from Jesus' divinity. Messiah (or Christ) is not a divine title. It's a title for

a human being with a special, God-appointed task. *Messiah* means "anointed one." To be anointed is to be called and empowered to fulfill a God-given role.

When he was baptized, Jesus was anointed by the Spirit of God, "descending on him like a dove," to *be* Messiah. At the same time, he was claimed by God, the voice from heaven, *as* Messiah. After living for 30 years as an ordinary human being, the time had come for Jesus to fulfill his destiny as Savior of the world.

Jesus, how your life changed when you were anointed that day! Yet you embraced your calling faithfully, and you never turned aside. You did what none of us could ever do. Thank you. Amen.

JESUS, SON OF GOD

"This is my Son, whom I love. . . ."

—Matthew 3:17

When Christians say Jesus is the Son of God, we mean that Jesus is God. But in the Bible, "Son of God" means something unique as well.

In Psalm 2:7, God tells Israel's king, "You are my son." So "son of God" refers to Israel's king. And when Luke gives a family history for Jesus, it goes all the way back to Adam, who is called "the son of God" (Luke 3:38). In the Bible, the human story starts with Adam. So "son of God" refers also to a foundational human being.

When Jesus is baptized, the voice from heaven says, "This is my Son." God could be making a theological statement, identifying Jesus too as God. But considering what's ahead for Jesus, that he will be acclaimed and crucified as Israel's king, could God also be identifying Jesus as king? And since Jesus is still dripping wet, with

his clothes clinging to his body, might God also be identifying Jesus as a foundational human being, a new Adam, as a fresh start for humanity?

God and king and human—maybe it all comes together at the river, with the sky torn open, the Spirit descending, and God claiming with pride, "My Son!" I wonder.

Jesus, Son of God, there is more to you than we realize. You are many things all at once. And you are wonderful. Amen.

JESUS THE SUPERHERO?

"Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

—Mark 4:41

Superheroes have superpowers: X-ray vision, shape-shifting, mind control. Sometimes we think of Jesus as a superhero. He does seem to have superpowers: multiplying loaves, stilling storms, even raising the dead.

Jesus also seems to have special knowledge: about Nathanael sitting under a fig tree (John 1:50), about a Samaritan woman's relationships (John 4), about Peter's upcoming denials (Mark 14:30). All of this is far beyond our abilities. So we figure that Jesus' divine nature must poke through his human nature from time to time.

But I wonder. Could it be that Jesus is able to do all of these things not because he is God but because he is a human being filled with the Holy Spirit?

When Nathanael calls Jesus "the Son of God . . . the king

of Israel," he means Jesus is the Messiah. The Samaritan woman reaches the same conclusion. *Messiah* means "anointed one." And the anointing is by the Holy Spirit of God. The same Spirit anointed prophets who multiplied food supplies and even raised the dead (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4).

Jesus is not a superhero. He is a person, God and human, who has a full measure of the Holy Spirit empowering his mission. As he tells the people from his hometown: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me . . ." (Luke 4:18). That's super enough.

Jesus, we don't need superheroes. We have you. You save us from evil powers and even from our own sin. Thank you. Amen.

EXTRAORDINARILY ORDINARY

"Will you give me a drink?"

—John 4:7

John 4 tells about an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a place called Jacob's well. Through their conversation something of the glory of Jesus is revealed. It's enough to convince the woman that Jesus is the Messiah. And more conversations convince many others that Jesus is the promised Savior. Extraordinary!

Here's how it starts. Jesus is bone tired. So he sits down by the well while his disciples go into town to buy food. He's obviously hungry, but that will have to wait till the disciples return. Meanwhile, he's thirsty. So when a woman comes to get water from the well, he asks her for a drink. That's how their conversation begins.

It's all so ordinary and human. Of course Jesus is tired. Of course he's hungry. Of course he's thirsty. He's human, after all—like us in every way, with

the same basic needs that have to be satisfied every day.

Jesus is not disguised as a human. He is fully human, just as he is fully God. And nothing about his humanity sets him above common human experiences—even ordinary ones like fatigue, hunger, and thirst. This will be true of him until the day he experiences the ultimate reality of being human: that we are vulnerable to suffering and death.

Jesus, most of our lives are so ordinary. Most of your life must have been ordinary too. So you understand us completely and love us totally. And we thank you for that. Amen.

THE HUMAN GLORY OF JESUS

Jesus . . . was made lower than the angels for a little while.

—Hebrews 2:9

Nobody likes to downgrade. Balding men want more hair, not less. Techies want a faster computer, not a slower one. And we all want better relationships, not worse ones. But the eternal Son of God downgraded to the nothingness of being human (Philippians 2:7). Imagine that.

There is glory and honor to being human. It's about what God made us to be: wise rulers over all creation. Sadly, that glory and honor have been tarnished by our persistent rebellion against God.

We are made in the image of God. This is a glorious thing, and it allows us to serve God in ways that no other creature can. But we let it go to our heads. We act as if we own the place. We use it and abuse it however we want. But the truth is, our world belongs to God.

Jesus restores the shine to being human. Unlike the rest of us, he is no petty tyrant. Instead he came "to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). And he was "crowned with glory and honor" for doing so (Hebrews 2:9). In fact, God exalted him to the highest place in heaven. And from there he rules wisely over all creation (Philippians 2:9-11), as human beings are meant to do.

Jesus, there are things about being human that we would gladly give up. But you have shown us how extraordinary we are meant to be. Help us to keep our eyes on you. Amen.

CREATION PERFECTED

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

—Genesis 1:31

Careful readers have noticed that God's creation in Genesis 1 looks like a temple. A temple is a place where heaven and earth meet. So in Genesis 2-3, God comes to the creation-temple to interact with his creatures.

Careful readers have also noticed that God's temple in 1 Kings 6-7 looks like creation. God was present in the temple, and once a year the high priest could be there too (Leviticus 16).

Sometimes people say that the creation was perfect, until sin messed things up. Well, sin did mess things up. It still does. But the creation was never perfect. It was just very good. There isn't perfection until the end, until there is a new heaven and earth.

In the new heaven and earth, there will be no temple

(Revelation 21:22) because the new heaven and earth won't intersect at just one place. Instead they will be united as one new reality. In this new reality, the home of God is with humanity. That's how God wants things to be and has always wanted things to be—with heaven and earth united.

The incarnation reflects this intention. Jesus himself is the new temple (John 2:19-21). Jesus himself is where heaven and earth meet. And in his person, God and humanity are united. That's not just very good. It's perfect.

Holy Jesus, you have made it possible for God and humanity to live together. Even more, you have made it real. How perfect is that? Amen.

THE FACE OF GOD

His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.
—Matthew 17:2

When Moses asked to see the glory of God, God said no. There was no way for anyone to see the glory of God's face and to live through it. So Moses had to hide behind a rock until God passed by (Exodus 33:18-23).

Jesus told his disciples, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). But he wasn't talking about seeing the Father physically. He meant that his own words and actions, his own heart and spirit, were a reflection of the Father. All that anyone could see physically when looking at Jesus was his humanity. His divinity was hidden, in a sense, underneath his humanity.

But one day, for a few moments on a mountain, Jesus' appearance changed. His clothes became as bright as white light. And his face "shone like the sun." His divine glory was shin-

ing from his body through his clothes. More than that, something like a veil was removed, so his face could be seen in all its glory. And of all people, Moses was there to see it.

The glory of God was fully present in Jesus. So Moses finally saw the face he had wanted to see so many years before. And one day, because of Jesus, we too will see the face of God. How wonderful!

Jesus, we want to know you, to love you, to follow you, to serve you, to see you. Open our hearts, our spirits, and our eyes to your presence. Amen.

HUMAN LIMITATIONS

He made himself nothing. . . .

—Philippians 2:7

Every December we celebrate the birth of Jesus. So this month we've been wondering about the incarnation—how Jesus is human, as human as any of us.

But Jesus is not just human. He is also God. As one of the church's ancient creeds puts it, he is "true God from true God."

Does that put limitations on Jesus' humanness? Does it put an asterisk next to his name? Is Jesus as human as any of us but not the same as any of us?

Philippians 2 tells us that Jesus left behind the advantages of being God, that he made himself nothing, that he humbled himself by becoming human, and that he suffered a shameful death. It sounds like Jesus embraced his humanness completely.

To be human is to be limited. Yes, we are made in the image

of God (Genesis 1:27). And yes, we are crowned with glory and honor from God (Psalm 8:5). But we are limited beings. Ultimately, we are limited by death. Whatever our strength and skills, whatever our passions and dreams, death will claim us.

Death claimed Jesus too. Jesus, who is eternal God, died. If he shared that ultimate human limitation with all of us, then maybe he shared the whole array of limitations that are part of being human. That's worth wondering about.

Jesus, our limitations frustrate us. Some of them even scare us. You know this because you experienced it, even the worst of it, for our sake. Thank you. Amen.

JESUS THE BLUR

"I am God and not a man."

—Hosea 11:9

There is a clear and great distinction between God, who is the Creator, and the creation, which is God's handiwork. God is forever; creation is for a while. God is perfect; creation, at its best, is very good. Creation *contains* life; God *is* life.

That great distinction gets blurred by the incarnation, when the Creator God takes on created flesh. For nine months, God takes shape in Mary's womb. Then, over time, God the baby becomes God the man.

Think about what this means. God stands on human legs and sees with human eyes. God thinks with a human brain, speaks with a human voice, and loves with a human heart. And at the end, God suffers blows and barbs in his human flesh, and he bears humiliation and shame in his human soul.

A whip tears up Jesus' back. Thorns pierce his brow. Slaps burn his face. Along with the thorny crown, a robe of royal purple completes the mocking picture of Jesus as a pathetic nobody, worthy only of pity.

"Look at this guy!" Pilate says with scorn in his voice (John 19:4-5). Yes, look at him. Jesus is just a blur, about to be smudged out. He looks nothing like God and nothing like a king. And that's the wonder of it. Because Jesus, the broken man, is God *and* King.

Jesus, help us to see clearly who you are so that we can love you more fully and follow you more closely. Amen.

THE KING WE GET

The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.
—Mark 15:26

Jesus is a human being, like any of us. Yet Jesus is extraordinary too. Because Jesus is a king. Who of us can say that?

When an angel announces the birth of Jesus, he is described as a king (Luke 1:32-33). When the Magi (wise men) journey to find Jesus, they are seeking a king (Matthew 2:2).

But Jesus winds up not looking much like a king. Instead of faithful followers, he has a band of disciples who betray him, deny him, or just abandon him. Instead of having a loyal army, he is mocked, beaten, and spit on by enemy soldiers. Instead of gold and jewels, he wears a crown of thorns. And instead of sitting high on a throne, he is lifted up onto a cross.

We might prefer to have Jesus be a superhero. Someone who stands tall. Someone

who has extraordinary powers. Someone who can deflect any attack and defeat every enemy. Someone who never loses. That's the kind of king we want!

But the King we get is as vulnerable as any of us. The King we get dies like any of us, like all of us. This means our King is human, as human as any of us. And he's just the King we need.

King Jesus, open our eyes a bit more today. Help us to see the King you are so that we can know the King we need. Amen.

GOD'S VOICE

When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. The earth shook, the rocks split. . . .

—Matthew 27:50-51

Elijah was on Mount Horeb when God said, “I am about to pass by.” Then a shattering wind started to blow. But God was not in the wind. Then the earth started to shake violently. But God was not in the earthquake. Then a fire started to blaze on the mountainside. But God was not in the fire. Then, with all this blazing, shaking, and shattering going on, God spoke in a whisper (or as the Hebrew text suggests, there was “a sound of sheer silence”—NRSV).

God sent Jesus into a mad world, a world gone crazy. We know what that’s like. It was a world filled with noise and turbulence. Roman armies rattled their weapons of domination, while rebel groups raised their shouts for freedom. Religious factions argued their points of doctrine, while broken people lifted their cries of pain.

In the midst of all this racket, God spoke quietly (silently?), sending us Jesus. He didn’t look like much. And in the world’s eyes he didn’t amount to much. Even so, his enemies and the Romans would orchestrate a spectacle to be rid of him. At the center of it all was a cross.

The sun went dark that afternoon, until Jesus cried out with all the voice he had: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” And when he died, crying out again and giving up his spirit, the earth shook and the rocks split. Because God had spoken.

Jesus, help us to listen for your voice, which calls us by name and leads us in the way of faithfulness. Amen.

MARY'S WOUNDS

"A sword will pierce your own soul too."

—Luke 2:35

We are wondering this month about the incarnation, about Jesus' being divine and human. He is both, but sometimes we downplay his genuine humanity. Sometimes we imagine his divine nature overcoming the weaknesses and shortcomings of his flesh and blood. But that would make Jesus something other than human.

I wonder what Mary thought about the genuine humanity of her son. When he was a cranky baby with teeth coming in, Mary would have comforted him. When he was a youngster with a skinned knee, Mary would have wiped away his tears and cleansed the wound. And when he focused on his mission and got too busy to eat, Mary worried and went with his brothers to find him. It seems they thought he might have gone out of his mind (Mark 3:20-21, 31).

Hardest of all, when soldiers stripped him naked and flogged him, when they drove nails through his flesh and bone to pin him to a cross, when his closest friends abandoned him, when he cried out in anguish, and when a spear opened a gash in his side, Mary stood by helplessly. She saw every bit of it. And she felt it all in the depths of her being. As Simeon had warned her, a sword pierced her soul too.

How human was Jesus? Human enough for his mother's heart to break.

Jesus, your mother loved you. She cared for you. She worried about you. She cried over you. How blessed you were to have your mother! Amen.

THE GLORY OF JESUS

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left.
—Mark 15:27

When we think of the glory of God, we probably have something like Isaiah 6 in mind. The prophet Isaiah had a vision of God in a heavenly temple, “high and exalted, seated on a throne.” Seraphim (fiery creatures with wings) were flying about, singing, “The whole earth is full of his glory.” And the temple trembled and shook (Isaiah 6:1-4).

That’s glory. Glory is big. Glory is high. Glory is powerful. No doubt that’s what James and John have in mind when they ask to sit on either side of Jesus in his glory. They want the best seats in the house. They want to be where the action is. They want to be where power resides.

They have no idea what they’re talking about. Because Jesus is on a long mission that will redefine glory. Glory will not describe an untouchable

God so high up as to be invisible, except in a vision. No. Glory will now describe God in human flesh, lifted a few feet off the ground and nailed to a cross. Glory will now describe the God available to be touched, to be spat upon, to be mocked. This is what it means for God to be human. And this is how glory is redefined when God becomes a suffering servant.

“We have seen his glory,” John says (John 1:14).

Jesus, we praise you for your glory. It’s a glory that overturns our expectations. Thank you for setting them right-side up. Amen.

SILENT NIGHT

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. . . .

—Luke 2:7

“Silent Night” is a favorite Christmas song for many people around the world. Its gentle melody suggests a “heavenly peace” in which “all is calm.”

But our usual picture of Jesus’ birth is far from calm. Above the fields near Bethlehem, an angel army sings out, announcing the glory of God. Back in town, shepherds and wise men and sheep, cows, camels, and gifts are all crowded together in a stable. And somewhere in the midst of all that commotion is the baby Jesus.

But hold on. The wise men don’t show up until later. So let’s take them out of the picture, along with their gifts. And there’s no mention of a stable—just a manger, a feeding trough. So there might not be animals there either.

Now let’s back up to the first hour or two after Jesus’ birth.

Commotion will come later, when the shepherds find “Mary and Joseph, and the baby . . . lying in the manger” (Luke 2:16). But for now, as lamplight flickers, all we can see is Mary and the baby and Joseph. Exhausted, Mary is fast asleep. Joseph might be able to rest too. Meanwhile, Mary’s snugly wrapped baby, content from his first feeding, sees light, shadow, and movement with his newborn eyes. Let’s stay right where we are, silent as night. And let’s take in the picture. The God of all creation is a newborn baby watching shadows sway.

Jesus, on that night long ago you came to be “God with us,” one of us. Thank you! Amen.

JOY TO THE WORLD!

She gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

—Luke 2:7

Oh, the wonder of it! The Holy Spirit overshadows the virgin Mary so that a holy child is conceived in her womb. For nine months the child develops in watery darkness to the soundtrack of Mary's heartbeat and muffled voice. At last the time comes. The child emerges, takes urgent breaths, and cries aloud amid faces beaming with hospitality and love. Welcome to the world!

Now let's just take this in. Who doesn't adore a sweet newborn? Bright eyes gazing around. Coos erupting after long months of silence. Arms and legs stretching out in new freedom.

Think too of the helplessness and vulnerability of the sweet child. Then imagine that this little one is our great God. The Word has no vocabulary, the Almighty has no strength, the Wise One has no knowledge.

The Lord of all is completely dependent on the comforting arms and nourishing care of mother Mary.

It's a wonder that God would become helpless in order to help us. But it's not that merely an infant is helpless while we who are grown up have things in hand. In the big, wide world around us, we are pretty helpless too. And all our hope depends on the help of the helpless baby, whose birth we celebrate today.

Jesus, you come into the world, and everything is changed—because you embraced helplessness to help the helpless. We praise you for your wonderful kindness. Amen.

SON OF ABRAHAM

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus. . . .
—Luke 2:21

I hope you're not squeamish, but today's focus is circumcision, the cutting away of the foreskin. In North America, circumcision is fairly common. It's usually done for medical reasons. But in the Bible, circumcision is performed as a sign of a special relationship with God.

It begins with Abraham and the covenant that God makes with him. God promises to bless Abraham and to bless all the peoples of the world through him (Genesis 12:2-3). And there's more: "Every male among you [in your household] who is eight days old must be circumcised" (Genesis 17:12). That's what God expects from Abraham and his descendants.

When the gospel writer Matthew tells the story of Jesus, he begins with Abraham. Because Jesus is a descendant of Abraham, Jesus is part of the

covenant relationship that God made with Abraham. So Jesus is circumcised when he is eight days old.

Here's what it adds up to. Jesus is as human as any of us, human enough to have part of his flesh cut away. But he is not just any human from anywhere. He is a Jew, a descendant of Abraham. And that makes him part of the one human family through whom God will bless all other human families, including yours and mine.

Jesus, Son of God, you are human, human enough to be marked in your flesh, human enough to be a son of Abraham, human enough to be the Savior of the world. We praise you. Amen.

THE SAME, BUT DIFFERENT

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.
—Luke 24:42-43

On the first Easter, Mary Magdalene wept at the empty tomb of Jesus. She was beside herself with grief. Then suddenly, when she turned around, she saw Jesus standing there. But she didn't recognize him. She guessed he was the gardener. Not a bad guess, considering where they were and what time of day it was. But when he spoke her name, then she could see. It was Jesus, still Jesus.

Later that day, Jesus joined a pair of despondent disciples walking to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). They had a long conversation with Jesus. But they didn't recognize him, not even when he was teaching them from the Scriptures. But when he broke bread with them, then they could see. It was Jesus, still Jesus.

Later that evening, Jesus also appeared to his disciples in

a locked room (Luke 24:36-49). They weren't sure it was him. Besides being able to suddenly appear and disappear, he seemed different. "Is this a ghost?" they wondered. But he wasn't that different. He was still flesh and bones. "Touch me and see," he said. And apparently he was hungry. So they gave him some fish to eat. Then they could see. It was Jesus, still Jesus.

Sure, he was different. But he was still the same. Sure, he was different. But he was still human. And he still is.

Jesus, when you rose from the dead, you didn't cast your human nature aside. You may be different, but you are still like us. We can't wait to be different like you. Amen.

RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

He showed them his hands and side.

—John 20:20

Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. In the end, we will live a new life in resurrected bodies as part of a new creation. Our bodies will be different from our original ones. But they will also have much in common with them.

Believing in our own resurrection is based on the resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection begins with him. New life begins with him.

Resurrection involves more than a dead person coming back to life. In resurrection a dead person begins a new kind of life. And it's a new kind of life in the body. That's the key point. The New Testament emphasizes that Jesus rose in his body. He is the same person who died. And now he lives a new life.

After his resurrection, Jesus wants to assure his disciples

that it's him they see, and that he is the same person. So he holds out his hands and uncovers his side to reveal his wounds. Then they know it's him. It's the same Jesus, the one and only Jesus, who died to save the world.

There are differences in Jesus' body from before his death to after his resurrection. But it's still him. He is still God in the flesh. And one day we will be like him.

Jesus, you gave up so much to become human. And you have remained human ever since. How much you love us! Amen.

HEAVENLY BODY

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . .
—Revelation 21:2

Heaven. The home of God and the angels. By God's grace, we hope to go there when we die. But heaven is not where we belong. Earth is. And in the end, we will have resurrected bodies for a new life on the new earth. Because earth and bodies go together.

For now, though, we go to heaven to be with Jesus when we die. We leave our bodies in the ground or maybe in ashes. And we go to heaven without them.

With Jesus it is different, though. After Jesus died and rose again, he went to be with his Father in heaven—and he went there in his body. By his resurrection, Jesus began a new life in a resurrected body. And that's how he went to heaven. He lifted up his hands to bless his disciples, and in the next moment he was lifted up to heaven—all of him.

Think about that. A complete human being, in heaven, with arms and legs and all the rest. Apparently the resurrection body is suitable for life on earth and in heaven. That's amazing, and it's a good thing. Because in the end, heaven and earth will be united. And that's where our new life will be, in resurrected bodies, with Jesus.

Jesus, we're in no hurry to die. But we can't wait to be with you—not just in heaven but on a new earth. What a day that will be! Amen.

NEW HUMANITY

Our lowly bodies . . . will be like his glorious body.

—Philippians 3:21

Throughout this month we have focused on the ordinary humanity of Jesus. The point is to take seriously what the Bible says: that Jesus was (and is) fully human, that he became like us in every way, except for sin.

Like us, Jesus had muscle aches and headaches. Like us, Jesus needed food and sleep, and he could be hurt and wounded. Like us, Jesus suffered when loved ones died. And like us, Jesus had an appointment with death. So yes, Jesus was like us in every way in his humanity, which is a wonder.

But here's something else that is truly wonderful. When Jesus comes again, we will be like him in every way in our new humanity!

The Bible doesn't give us much to go on. But there is this much at least. To be human is to be in the image of God. But with

us the image lost its shine. Until Jesus. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being" (Hebrews 1:3). Now, in his humanity, Jesus is a new creation. He is humanity perfected.

And in the end, we will be like him. We won't be divine. But we will be everything human beings are supposed to be. According to the Bible, that's a pretty glorious thing.

Jesus, we want to love what you love and do what you would have us do. Because, more than anything, we want to be like you. Amen.

THE INCARNATION CONTINUES

You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
—1 Corinthians 12:27

Since he ascended to heaven, Jesus Christ is no longer with us on earth in the flesh. But the incarnation continues. Jesus is still human, and in his human body he is in heaven. But that's not all. Jesus is still living and active here on the earth in human form, because the church is his body on earth. (The church is not a building but is made up of all of us humans who believe in him.)

The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary so that Jesus was conceived in her womb. The same Spirit filled Jesus at his baptism. The same Spirit was poured out on Jesus' disciples on Pentecost. And the same Spirit lives in us, the church, to this day.

Jesus breathed the Spirit onto his disciples, saying, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." The church is sent,

like Jesus, to announce and embody the kingdom of God.

So the church speaks the truth in love—the truth about sin, judgment, and forgiveness. But that's not all. The church also comes alongside people: to suffer with those who suffer, to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to visit those who are sick or in prison, to feed those who are hungry.

When the church is faithful to its calling, Jesus himself becomes visible in our humanity. So the incarnation continues on earth until Jesus returns.

Jesus, fill the church with your Spirit so that together we will reflect the kingdom of God. And may all praise be to you, with the Father and the Spirit. Amen!



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