

**Romans 1:1-6**  
**“Believing the Incarnation”**  
**December 18, 2016**  
**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

It is time to turn away from Genesis 24 to subjects appropriate to the Advent season. The text I have chosen for this morning’s sermon is useful in particular for the artless way in which it speaks of the stupendous, world-shattering, human life-transforming thing that happened that first Christmas.

**Text Comment**

- v.1 Paul begins with this word “gospel” which means “good news” or “glad tidings.” Some form of the word occurs, as you may remember, many times in Romans and in the rest of Paul’s letters. Indeed, 60 of the word’s 76 occurrences in the New Testament are in Paul’s writings. The gospel was his business, his calling, his life’s work. It was also the great passion of Paul’s life since that moment when the former persecutor of the church met the exalted Lord Christ on the road to Damascus. In 1 Corinthians, as you may remember, Paul wrote, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.”
- v.3 The good news, the glad tidings are about Jesus, “who was born of the seed of David *according to the flesh*.” Jesus was a physical descendant of David; King David was his ancestor on his father Joseph’s side, the side that counted, and may have been of David’s royal line on his mother Mary’s side as well, though that is not certain. This is important because Davidic descent was a key identifier of the long-promised Messiah; the coming king would be a descendant of David, Israel’s greatest king.
- v.4 More than once in the NT it is the resurrection that is said to have elevated Jesus Christ to an exalted state. He lived his life up to and through his death on the cross in humiliation and weakness, unrecognized by most everyone as the person he actually was, subject even to the contempt of many of his own people. The resurrection changed all of that!
- v.5 Paul writes “the obedience of faith,” and means by that phrase that all mankind is now summoned to believe in Jesus the Son of God and all people are obliged to submit their lives to him. Jesus is not some local deity. He is the savior of the world, the world of which he is also creator and ruler. His apostles were commanded by him after his resurrection to make disciples of *all* nations. *And so to believe in Jesus is an act of obedience to God*. That is why in Hebrews 5:9 we read that Jesus is the source of eternal salvation to all *who obey him*. “Come unto me,” is not just an invitation, it is a command.

As I said, I chose this text for this Advent Sunday sermon because of the artless way in which it teaches the fact of the incarnation of God, God the Son taking to himself a human nature. By “artless” I mean “matter-of-fact,” “simple,” or “without special emphasis.” That is, Paul says the most stupendous thing about Jesus as if it were something that, of course, everyone knew and understood, as if it were a fact beyond the possibility of doubt. What Paul says about Jesus is, of course, the substance of the Christmas story. The infant born to the Virgin Mary was a person

*who already existed*, indeed had always existed, and who then came into the world in order to be born as a human being. He did not begin to be when conceived in his mother's womb or born in Bethlehem, as every other human being begins to be when he or she is conceived. He was eternal God; but now, for the first time, he was also a true human being. That Paul should begin his great letter to the Romans – his summary of the Christian faith – with this thought, or that he should virtually *define the gospel* as the good news that Jesus was God come in human nature, reminds us how fundamental to everything that Christians believe is the incarnation of God the Son.

Now, out the outset, let's make sure we capture the drift of Paul's thought. He says in v. 3 that the gospel concerns God's Son *who was descended from David according to the flesh*. Now taking into account his various usages of that term "flesh" – the Greek word "*sarx*" – here and elsewhere, Paul is certainly and uncontroversially to be taken to mean that Jesus descended from David *insofar as his human nature is concerned*, or *insofar as he is a human being*. But to speak in that way is obviously and emphatically to indicate that his being a human being *is not the whole truth about Jesus*. [Cranfield, I, 60] There is more to be said about him than that he is a human being! That is all that can be said about you and me – we are human beings, nothing more – but that is not all that can be said about Jesus.

Later in Romans, in 9:5, Paul says a similar thing. He is speaking there of the privileges of the Jews as the people of God and, in concluding a long list of those privileges, he says in a similarly artless way:

"To them belong the patriarchs – that is, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and from their race, *according to the flesh*, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."

According to his flesh, or his human nature or humanity, or his manhood, Jesus is a Jew, he descended from Jews. That is the privilege of the Jews: that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords was himself a Jew. But that is hardly all that may be said of him. *He is also God over all*. And, of course, for Paul to say that Jesus *is God* amounts to his saying that he is Yahweh, the God who has revealed himself in his Word, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which is to say the only God, the living and true God, the creator of heaven and earth. Though Romans 9:5 is, in fact, the only place in his letters where Paul calls Jesus "God" in so many words, in many other places in his letters he identifies Jesus with Yahweh, the God of Israel and the ancient Scriptures. And, of course, the rest of the NT does this as well. I may have told you that in the most recent edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, the edition used by all biblical scholarship, the fifth verse of Jude now actually reads that "*Jesus delivered his people from Egypt*." It was always the most likely reading, the manuscript evidence being what it is, but only now have the editors of the Greek New Testament admitted that fact and made it the official reading of the Greek text of Jude. That is, it is their considered judgment and the considered judgment of almost all biblical scholarship, that what Jude actually wrote was that Jesus delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt.

Now that is an extraordinary thing to say and to say it at all – that Jesus delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt – requires that everyone at least admit that what is taught in the New Testament is that the man Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the living *God*! How could Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary during the reign of the emperor Augustus, lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt 1400 years earlier? How is it possible that Jesus, the man who walked the roads of Galilee and

Judea and suffered and died on the cross during the reign of the emperor Tiberius, is the same person that Moses worshipped as Yahweh, who spoke to him from the burning bush, or met him on Mt. Sinai? Only because this one person who, at Christmas, was born to Mary as a human baby, had always existed as God. His human name is Jesus; he wasn't called Jesus in the OT, he was called Yahweh or, simply, God. But it is the same person which alone explains why Jude, the Lord's brother, could write, as he did, that his elder brother Jesus had delivered Israel from Egypt at the exodus. Jesus is the name we now know him by, his human name, but so much is the man Jesus the same person as God, that his human name can be used in describing what he did before he became a man and before anyone knew him as Jesus.

This is what makes Jesus so utterly unique, this is what makes his life, death, and resurrection so impossibly important, and this is what makes faith in Jesus and obedience to Jesus the calling of every human being on the face of the earth. The truly astounding thing about Jesus is that he didn't begin to be when he was conceived in the womb of his mother; he had always been. Only his human nature began to be at a certain moment in history, the moment we celebrate at Christmas. One person now with two natures, not just one: that is the utter mystery of the incarnation of God. You and I have but one nature, a human one; the Son of God now has two! We will consider that mystery next time, on Christmas Sunday.

And make no mistake, whether you fully appreciate this fact or not, that fact about Jesus – that he is eternal God and at a moment in history became also a man – *is why you are sitting here this morning, why Christians are Christians*. It is this fact that makes the birth of Christ, which we celebrate at Christmas, what Alfred Edersheim called “the world's greatest event.” [*The Life and Times...*, 185] Dorothy Sayers, the English novelist and playwright put it more strongly still. Understanding what it must mean that God himself had become a baby boy she described the birth of Christ as “the only thing that has ever really happened.” “When you understand this,” she wrote, “you will understand all prophecies and all history.”

No other religion or philosophy makes such an astonishing claim. The others have their founders – Confucius or Buddha or Mohammed – they have their teachers – Kant or Marx or Freud or Darwin – but no one claims that any of these is God, the creator of heaven and earth. That is Christianity's exclusive and distinctive message: that its founder, God himself, entered the world as a man.

We Christians get too easily used to these stupendous assertions. We treat God becoming man as a commonplace of our confession. We sing about it, we confess it in the creed, we hear it preached until it seems to us an almost ordinary thing. As Paul here in the opening verses of Romans 1, it trips off our tongue. But Paul knew that this was the furthest thing from something ordinary! This was NEWS! This was truth to shout from the housetops and to ponder at length and to sing joyfully with a full heart! A visit to earth from heaven, the Creator himself appearing *incognito*, willing to endure the most horrific trials if only he might win the salvation of his people from sin and death, deliver them from their bondage to the cruelest of masters. We can call this history of the incarnation exhilarating or fascinating or even devastating, but if we call it dull or uninteresting there must be something deeply wrong with us! All human stories of adventure, of sacrificial love, of desperate battles pale in comparison to this!

As has often been pointed out, our entire faith as Christians rests on this foundation. And that, Paul says, is why the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is so crucial. It confirmed the truth about Jesus, it authenticated his claim to be God as well as man, it revealed for all time the true meaning of his human life, and it finished the work he became a man to perform. He came into this world to save us from sin and death and deliver us into eternal life. And his resurrection was at one and the same time the accomplishment, the demonstration, and the illustration of that salvation. Because of his conquest of sin and death *as a man in our place* we who trust in him will also rise from the dead to new and everlasting human life.

*But it is the incarnation that makes all of that possible.* God had first to come into the world as a man if he were to accomplish that salvation. God cannot die as punishment for sin and so cannot rise from death to eternal *human* life. Only a man could do that; and so it was that God became man. Francis Turretin, the 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian, whose work is usually dry as dust, put this beautifully:

“The work of redemption could not have been performed except by a God-man associating by incarnation the human nature with the divine by an indissoluble bond. For since to redeem us, two things were most especially required...our mediator ought to be God-man to accomplish these things: man to suffer, God to overcome.... For neither could God alone be subject to death, nor could man alone conquer it. Man alone could die for men; God alone could vanquish death.” [XIII, iii, xix]

In other words, God didn't save us by becoming a man, but he couldn't have saved us without doing so. And so it is that the incarnation explains everything else in our faith and so it is, therefore, the incarnation that likewise answers all the standard objections to our faith.

*First*, take the miracles reported in the four Gospels. Can we who live in the scientific and technological 21<sup>st</sup> century actually believe that Jesus walked on water or fed 5,000 people with a few scraps of food, or that he gave sight to a man who had been blind from birth, or that he rose from the dead? Many people, as we know, from the very beginning to the present day, find these accounts incredible and treat them as legends. But, of course, as the Gospels make clear, these events were as staggering to those who witnessed them in the first place, utterly inexplicable, something that transcended everything in their own experience, as they would be for us to witness them today. There is nothing legendary about the Gospel narratives. They don't read like legends, they have all the marks of real history. But all the difficulty associated with the miracles simply disappears if you accept that Jesus was God himself, the living God, now come in the flesh. If Jesus were the God/Man the difficulty is no longer the claim that that he rose from the dead; the really staggering thing is that he died in the first place.

*Second*, think of the offense the gospel creates in the minds of so many in our pluralist and relativist day. How dare the Christians to claim that there is but one way to heaven, that Christianity is the only true faith, and that in their core message all other religions and philosophies of life that leave Jesus Christ out of account are and must be false. “What effrontery!” people nowadays are very likely to say, “To claim that you have the truth about God, man, and salvation, and that no one else does. Where do you get off?”

But if God became man in Jesus Christ so that he could suffer and die to save us from our sins, it is not effrontery but common sense that Christ and Christ alone is the answer to the human problem of sin, guilt, death, and estrangement from God. Obviously, if the living God himself entered the world to save sinners, if he did so by dying on the cross for our sins, then surely it must be obvious to anyone that there is not some other way to heaven other than by Jesus Christ. In fact, one of the most prominent of religious pluralists in the modern day, John Hick, admitted this in his book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. As the title of his book indicates, Hick was happy to accept the incarnation as a religious *idea*, a metaphor for God's nearness to man, but he would have nothing to do with it as history, as something that actually happened. Why? Because if the incarnation were history, we would all have to accept that Christianity is alone the truth about salvation, the Christian faith alone the way to find peace with God and eternal life, and Hick, as a modern man, most assuredly does not want to believe *that!* But that is itself powerful evidence of how vast the implications of the incarnation are and must be, even if unwelcome to modern tastes.

Or, *as a third example*, consider the Bible's teaching of the sinfulness and guilt of all human beings before a holy God. Modern people especially do not care to hear that they are as sinful, unworthy, morally helpless, and liable to divine judgment as the Bible says they are. They do not want to believe that they need a salvation that required such desperate sacrifices on the part of God himself. They think better of themselves than that! But accept the incarnation and all our protestations of our own goodness, all our opinions that the Bible is too gloomy in its assessment of human nature are revealed as so much self-serving, dishonest, and utterly foolish hypocrisy. If it took God coming into the world, becoming a man, suffering the rejection of his own creatures, eventually to be murdered by them; I say if it took *this* to rid us of our sin and guilt, we must have a great deal of sin and guilt to remove! If it took the greatest thing that ever happened to deliver us we must have been in great need of deliverance!

Or, *fourth and finally*, consider the all too common objection – probably the reason most people really are not interested in becoming Christians – that the Christian faith asks too much of its followers. It is one thing to be asked to perform some rituals now and then, or to embrace a not very demanding ethical system. Human religion asks no more than that. It is one thing to practice one's religion while at the same time living life largely as one finds it easy to do, as one wishes to live it, comfortably, largely for oneself, being required to make few changes and fewer real sacrifices. But Christianity demands the full submission of one's life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, obedience to the searching demands of God's law, *and* the willingness to suffer any manner or measure of loss for the sake of serving God. The Christian faith sets before us standards of life and behavior so high that no one can attain to them in this life or ever has, but that everyone must, nevertheless, strive to attain them every day. Christianity requires us to live every day in that weary world between what we are and what we ought to be. We are even required to love our enemies. Surely that is asking too much!

But what if God really did enter his world as a man to secure our salvation from sin and death? What if he subjected himself to punishing humiliation at the hands of his own creatures for our sake? What if our salvation actually cost *that* much and required *that* much of God? Well, then, the logic of the celebrated missionary C.T. Studd is irresistible: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then *no* sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him." The incarnation means, and

must mean, that we can no longer fit our Christianity into the rest of our lives; we must fit our lives into our Christianity, with all that this must mean.

In all these ways and others the incarnation is the foundation, the explanation, and the demonstration of our faith as Christians. The gospel is precisely the news that God the Father did for us what we could not do for ourselves, namely sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to offer himself as a sacrifice to cleanse us from our sin, which is, after all, the universal teaching of the Bible.

But, of course, how do we know that Jesus was God now come in the flesh? Many people saw Jesus during the days of his life on earth, many were dumbstruck at the things he did, moved deeply by the things he taught, arrested by the goodness of his life, *but most didn't recognize him as God*. They had no idea that this same Jesus, in his divine nature, was the creator of heaven and earth. They had no idea that he had existed from all eternity. Why would they? The idea was utterly beyond them. You can't see God and there was Jesus plain as day, a man; he looked like a man, talked like a man, acted like a man. They wouldn't have been able to imagine that such a thing as God becoming man was even possible. They couldn't see the incarnation because the divine nature was hidden behind the human nature. Only once, at the Lord's transfiguration, was it revealed and then only to three of the Lord's disciples.

And, of course, in the ages since, a great many people who know what Christians claim about Jesus – that he is both God and man – have not believed that the incarnation ever happened. They have thought and many times have said, “If I am supposed to believe *that* I need some proof; I need to see this incarnation for myself.” Celsus, an early Roman critic of the Christian faith said precisely that: “But if he was really so great, he ought, in order to display his divinity, to have disappeared suddenly from the cross.” [Origen, *Contra Celsum*, II, 68] So why should he or, for that matter, why should we believe that Jesus was God incarnate?

The first thing that we ought to say in answering that question is that everyone, no matter his convictions about fundamental reality, *must believe them*. John Hick wants to believe that all religions and philosophies lead to God, but he certainly can't prove that in a laboratory. He has faith that it is so, but no mathematical formula will prove it so. And so with everyone's fundamental convictions about the meaning and future of human life, about the nature of God and of man.

Why do *we* believe and believe so confidently in the incarnation of God, that Jesus is both God and man? Why are *we* so little troubled by the doubts of others or the arguments of Celsus or John Hick? Well, there are a great many reasons, though probably only a few Christians can list them off the top of their heads. We believe the Bible's account of the incarnation of God because

1. We believe the Bible, we find in it the hard-edged truth about everything and, supremely, about God and about ourselves. It confirms its truthfulness to us in a thousand ways and in a way utterly unique reveals to us reality as we know it to be.
2. We believe the incarnation because the account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus authenticates itself to us across the centuries. This is not the story anyone then would have invented, Jew or Gentile, it is wholly unlike anything else from that time and place, we hear the

ring of truth in the whole and in all its parts, it has none of the features of invention and all the features of serious history. It has convinced our reason!

3. We believe the incarnation because it explains so much in human history that cannot be explained otherwise, from the rise of the church, to the message of the New Testament, to the history of Christian experience. I could go on and on.

4. But we believe the incarnation supremely because we have encountered the Lord Jesus ourselves, which, in a word, would be impossible if he were only a man, long since dead. He has revealed himself to us as the God-man. It is difficult not to believe in the existence of someone you have yourself met and come to know; all the more someone who has had such a tremendous influence upon your life!

So we do not hesitate to say that *we believe* the incarnation. We are not, for that reason, *less* sure of its truth, but *more*.

Strong Son of God, Immortal Love,  
Whom we, who cannot see thy face,  
By faith and faith alone embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove.

I often quote to you the sayings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterian missionary, churchman, and Hebrew professor John Duncan. He combined vast knowledge with rare insight and added a knack for putting things in a memorable way. He once remarked, concerning Presbyterians like you and me:

“We make far too little of the incarnation; the Fathers knew much more of the Incarnate God. Some of them were oftener at Bethlehem than at Calvary; they had too little of Calvary, but they knew Bethlehem well. They took up the Holy Babe in their arms; they loved Immanuel, God with us. We are not too often at the cross, but we are too seldom at the cradle; and we know too little of the Word made flesh...” [Moody Stuart, *Life of Duncan*, 167]

Let that not be said of us; especially this Advent. Let us, you and I, find ourselves, in heart and mind, in Bethlehem, loving Immanuel, God with us!