

The Word Became Flesh

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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John 1:14-18 (NIV2011)

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Luke 1:26–38 (NIV2011)

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

John now offers a second testimony about Jesus, the Word become flesh.

One of the difficulties when we begin to speak of Jesus is that we come with so many well-worn expectations of what we are going to find. This is especially true of long-time, thoughtful Christians who have been exposed to teachings about Jesus for a long time. We come to John’s prologue (1:1-18) and our minds race ahead to thoughts of the Trinity and other formulations we’ve heard many times. But we have to strive first to hear John’s testimony as if we were hearing it for the first time, and even as if we were among John’s first-century readers.

Last week, we saw that John began his gospel with the totally bewildering claim that Jesus, this carpenter from Nazareth, “was God” (1:1), the creator, without whom nothing was made. How could such a thing be? How could anyone hope to make sense of such an assertion?

And then John goes on in verse 14 to make clear the implication of this claim:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”¹

For a moment, this second claim about Jesus seems pretty straightforward, just the outworking of John’s opening claim about Jesus. But read v. 14 this way: “*God* became flesh.” This “enfleshing” of God, this incarnation, is beyond our comprehension. When we

¹The phrasing “made his dwelling among us” refers to the Hebrew Bible’s speaking of the LORD God “tabernacling” with his people, first, in the transportable tabernacle and then in the temple in Jerusalem. For John, it is a way of making absolutely clear his claim that YHWH, the God of the Israelites and the Lord of all, was “enfleshed” in this man, Jesus.

claim to truly understand how such a thing can be, we reveal only our own foolishness. We try to make sense of this, but our reason fails. After all, how could it really be that this one person, Jesus, is both God (1:1) and human (1:14), born to a young woman from Galilee and raised in a small village. In our pride we insist that it *must* make sense to us before we could accept it as true, so we insist on trying to figure it out. And sadly, we find ourselves wandering down an error-strewn path away from the Jesus-who-is.

Fully God and fully human?

Try to get your brain around that for a minute; both are claimed by John in his opening prologue. It isn't surprising that the Christian community has always had to work through well-meaning but misguided attempts to explain how Jesus could be truly God and truly human at the same time. Over the last 2,000 years, some Christians have claimed that Jesus was the person closest to God, even the most God-like, but not really and truly God. Others have claimed that he only appeared to be human, but wasn't really, truly human like you and me. They've all been busy trying to figure it out. And they've all failed.

Great councils of the church met to explain the serious errors about Jesus that undercut the Gospel; they sought to clarify what the whole of Scripture really teaches about Jesus, and what it doesn't. I suppose that it is no surprise that the various claims about Jesus have proved to be some of the most contentious among Christians. To claim that Jesus is simply "fully God and fully human" seems almost like a copout.

Here are a few more ways Christians have gotten this wrong:

- One way some have tried to solve the mystery is by seeing Jesus as having only one, unique nature, a hybrid of sorts – the unique "God-man." Of course, then he wouldn't be truly God or truly human. It would be as if Jesus was a third "species." That doesn't really square with even the first verses of John's prologue.
- Another way is to suggest that Jesus had a truly human body, but lacked a human rational mind or soul, instead being filled with the divine Logos/Word. Jesus then becomes "God in a bod," again losing his true humanity. There is much more to being human than merely this bag of blood and bones.
- Or perhaps Jesus is a perfect "moral union," much like persons in a perfect marriage. One nature doing the "God stuff" and one nature doing the "human stuff." Of course, he is then only half God and half human. For good reason, the church councils insisted that Jesus' two natures are inseparable – not a right and left or top and bottom division of Jesus into two parts.
- Or still another choice . . . "Jesus' humanity was like a drop of wine in an ocean of his divinity." But then what remains of Jesus' humanity? How can we speak of a "drop of humanity" in the Garden of Gethsemane? Jesus was fully and completely human; indeed, he was the most human, human.

It would be a mistake to see all this as so much pointless speculation. Christians have always known that answering the question, "Who is Jesus?" lies at the very heart of the Gospel. Christians of all stripes have wrestled with Scripture, trying to make sense of what is revealed there about Jesus. Yes, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). And yes, Jesus was born to a young woman from a small village in Galilee (Luke 1:26-38). The creed writers didn't invent anything; they simply brought together the core teachings and practices of the early church which were grounded in the witness of the apostles, such as John. The great councils' language expressed, in increasingly precise terms, those teachings and practices.

The great Christian confessions, including the UMC statement of faith, uphold two inseparable natures, divine & human, in one person, Jesus – sort of two "whats" and one

“who.”² How can this be? Trying too hard to answer that question has led inevitably to distortions of Jesus and of the Gospel. (If you think you’ve figured out how this can be, if it “makes sense” to you, come see me and I’ll help you see your mistake.)

The unexpected

The idea that the creator of the cosmos would choose to “become flesh and dwell among us” is one thing. But to be born as he was, lying in an animal feed trough, surrounded by a bunch of no-account shepherds and smelly beasts. My heart and mind reel with the question – “What does this tell me about God . . . and about myself?”

The Jews of Jesus’ day chafed under the oppression of the Romans and their puppet king, Herod. The people anxiously waited for the day when God would raise up his messiah, his anointed one, who would throw off Roman rule and cleanse the temple of all pagan influences. The Jews believed that this messiah would arrive in power and might and wonder and glory. The messiah would look like, well . . . a messiah, a king. At one point in the movie, *Nativity Story*, Herod, fearing the rise of this messiah, instructs his soldiers to inspect all the men returning to Bethlehem for the Roman-ordered census, believing that they’d know the messiah when they see him.

But, of course, everyone was looking in the wrong direction. God’s messenger comes to a very young unmarried woman, probably 13 or 14, who lives in the very insignificant village of Nazareth in Galilee. When the angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary she is engaged to Joseph in an arranged marriage. Following the unusual Jewish customs of that day, when Joseph and Mary are engaged, they are considered legally married though they cannot live together nor share sexual intimacy for a year. Thus, when Mary’s pregnancy begins to show it is taken to result from an act of adultery, giving Joseph every right to divorce her or even sanction her stoning.

This is how God is born? This village and this shamed couple are the places Herod should have been looking? It was unthinkable then and if we stop to think about, it is just as shocking now. The Christmas story is the great Divine Reversal. In is out. Up is down. Great is small. As Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth when they are both pregnant, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). Unexpected yes, but Good News beyond our imagining.

Humble and approachable

It comes down to this. It is easy to know that God is great – just open a window and look around. The greatness of God comes easily to our minds and hearts. And it is easy to know that God is God and we’re not. The history of humanity’s many religions is the story of distant and powerful gods. Even the ancient Jews knew God as basically unapproachable, for only on a single day of the year could the high priest step into God’s presence.

But to know that God is humble and approachable, that we could never know without the birth of the Christ child. What sort of God makes himself known in this way, a helpless infant? It seems miracle enough that God would take on our weak, tear-filled humanity. But born to Mary and Joseph?

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey writes, “The God who created matter took shape within it, as an artist might become a spot on a painting or a playwright a character within his own play. God wrote a story, only using real characters, on the real pages of history. The Word become flesh.” The truth is that for all our intellectual vanity, we can do no more than the shepherds, worship Jesus and run to tell others this Good News.

²Using “what/nature” and “who/person,” Jesus is two “whats” (two natures, human and divine) and one “who” (Jesus). We can speak of the Trinity as one “what” (a single divine nature) and three “whos” (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Discuss the various ways you get to know someone. How would you get to know better the other people in your connection group? How would you get to know a person you couldn't ever meet face-to-face? How important would it be what someone else had to say about that person? How can a person get to know a historical figure? How about getting to know Jesus?
2. What if Jesus isn't really human? Why is this claim so important to the Good News? What does this claim say about you and me?
3. In story of Jesus' birth, one can't help being struck by the ordinary sorts of people chosen by God to play most extraordinary roles in human history. Are we prepared for the extraordinary work God wants to do in our lives? Are we prepared to hear God when he asks us to undertake something extraordinary, or seemingly impossible, in the furtherance of his kingdom?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Exodus 25:1-8 The people are to build a tabernacle so God may dwell with them.	Tuesday, John 11:17-37 Jesus weeps at the death of Lazarus, whom he loved (11:3).
Wednesday, Romans 1:1-7 How would you summarize what Paul says about Jesus in the opening verses of this letter?	Thursday, Philippians 2:5-8 What do you think is meant by "though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself"?
Friday, 1 Peter 1:1-2 Do you see the Trinitarian nature of Paul's salutation?	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Gospel of John

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.
Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring a lunch if you like. Bring a study Bible.

Monday Evening Class – beginning January 23

A new weekly Bible study that will meet every Monday evening from 6:45 to 8:00 in Piro Hall. The first course will be *Paul and the Galatians*

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.
The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series:

Through Jan 29: a series with Rev. Arthur Jones

*Whose Jesus is the Real Jesus?:
The Gospels and Other Takes on the Son of God*

Beginning Feb 5: a four-week series with Dr. Scott Engle

*Sin: A History
The story of sin and forgiveness from Genesis to now*