

This is the second sermon in a 7-part series, digging into why God would decide to become human and what difference that makes. Ultimately, I’m wanting to explore the character of Jesus and how what the gospels claim he said and did are the basis for how we live our lives as people of faith.

There is a lot about “Christianity” that has gone awry, and it is my pursuit to take a long hard look at the origin of our faith and find, at least for myself, a claim on the foundations of my faith.

Last week, I introduced the series by inviting each of us to meditate on how we have intersected with Jesus throughout our lives; claiming for ourselves who Jesus is, personally. Today I want to explore why it is that God decided to become human 2000 years ago? What was happening then that made it the time for God to literally step into our lives through birth and growth and human interaction?

As far as we know, God had never done that before. There are some tales in the Hebrew scriptures that allude to events that seemed to involve angels incarnate. In Genesis 18, right before Abram and Sarai are about to receive the news that they will in fact have a child together, even in their advanced years, three “strangers” appear at their compound. It is one of these guests who will deliver the message of Sarai’s impending pregnancy. They came, they went, they were never seen again. Andrei Rublev immortalized this visit in his painting “The Trinity.”

In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with someone on the edge of the River Jabbok. Artists for centuries have portrayed the “person” as an angel, like in this print by Gustave Doré.

In Exodus 33 - Moses asks to see God’s glorious presence. God responds by saying, “I’ll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I’ll proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord.’ ... But,” the Lord said, “you can’t see my face because no one can see me and live.” 21 The Lord said, “Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. 22 As my glorious presence passes by, I’ll set you in a gap in the rock, and I’ll cover you with my hand until I’ve passed by. 23 Then I’ll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won’t be visible.”

So, there are a few accounts of God (or God’s messengers) being anthropomorphized. But, in Jesus, God was definitely exploring new ground (at least as far as we know). God being born. God being a child. God being a teenager! God becoming a young adult. Living, moving, breathing, amongst mortals. But why then? Why there?

It makes sense that God would be made manifest amongst the Jews, as this is the tradition out of which Jesus taught. It was the community from which his family of origin, that is Mary and Joseph, were part. We cannot separate his Jewish heritage from the timing. And this is why I found the first chapters in Matthew and Luke so interesting in my pursuit of the timing of God coming to live amongst people.

In a quick answer to the question, "Why then?" I'm not sure I've discovered a sufficient answer. There is nothing about what was happening in Palestine 2000 years ago that is an obvious trigger. It was a fascinating world. The presence of Greek culture was rampant. Greek was one of the spoken languages of the time - and people were well aware of Greek mythology and traditions. However, the primary occupying force in the area was Rome. The Romans had built their Empire out to what we call the Holy Land, and they held the strings of power in the area. In fact, at Jesus' crucifixion, all the gospels relate a story of a sign being posted above Jesus, saying "The King of the Jews." John's gospel tells us that it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. All of these languages, with their respective cultures, were part of the mixture of the world into which Jesus was born, and died.

Both Matthew and Luke speak of the Herod family, who ruled the region from about 75 years before Jesus was born to roughly 50 years after. While they were technically Jewish, they were skilled soldiers and shrewd diplomats who earned the favor of the Roman Caesars. Jesus was born under Herod the Great, who was so ruthless that he had one of his wives and his sons by her executed - and it was he about whom Matthew tells the story of the massacre of Bethlehem's children. After his death in 4 BCE, three of his sons ruled the region. Jesus and John the Baptizer carried out most of their public ministry under Herod Antipas. It was he who had John beheaded. It was he to whom Jesus referred as "that fox" who wanted to kill Jesus.

We, in the church, claim to want to avoid politics in worship, however, now, just as then, the way the people are governed matters significantly to the quality of their lives and their ability to live freely. Jesus would have to confront these issues were he to be true to his call to bring people closer to God. And the more folks of faith were complicit with the system, the more challenging his rhetoric came.

As the gospels unfold, we see that many within the Jewish power system had tried to marry their religious views with the empire's values, and it didn't add up with Jesus' kin-dom values. But that sermon will come later on. However, this is some background regarding the world into which Jesus was born.

Both Matthew and Luke, explain in their own ways, why it is that Jesus came when he did.

Matthew's use of the genealogy is interesting. While I wasn't about to take the time to have Amanda read all of those "begats," it was important for you to see them. And more so, to see the structure around which Matthew built it. It would be one thing for there to be a lineage tracing Jesus to Abraham. When Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, that was the beginning of the promise God made to them to be a blessing to the world by making their family as numerous as the stars in the sky, and peppering the earth with God's people.

It would also be enough to trace Jesus back to David, the most powerful king of biblical Israel. But Matthew's genealogy goes even deeper than that. He divides each generational grouping into fourteen. The first age,

is the one of **beginnings** - when the promise of God to be faithful to a chosen people inaugurates. As troubling times hit, there was a cry from the people for God to establish **kings** to rule over them, and David, the runt of his family litter, was the one chosen by the prophet Samuel to be the king. (One nerdy note that I read says that if you give number value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the consonants of David's name--daleth (4), waw (6), daleth (4)--add up to 14.) For it is then 14 generations after David that the Hebrew people were taken into **exile** in Babylon, and then another 14 from the exile to Jesus.

More numbers: Within Jewish tradition, the number seven represents completeness and perfection. That it worked out that Matthew tells us that these big occasions happened after 7×2 is a mystery only God knows. Three is also a number for completeness. That there are three of these 14-year epochs separating the ancient promise in Abram and Sarai to the new promise in Jesus is significant. Matthew definitely massaged the genealogy to fit this scheme, however it was his point to show that these major events happened within God's right time.

After the genealogy, Matthew covers "The Birth of Jesus." One of my seminary professors who wrote a book about Matthew's gospel, imparts that the fact that the gospel tells us that Joseph had nothing to do with Mary's pregnancy, tells us that Jesus' entrance into the world is *something radically different* from any other child born from a woman. This is less a "birth" story, than an "origin" story. My professor's point is that Abraham initiated an era. David initiated an era. The exile initiated an era. But

each of those eras closed and was succeeded by another. Jesus coming closed an era, and opened a new one for eternity.

Matthew and Luke each agree on Jesus' purpose; his parents were told to name him *Jeshua* for a reason - it means "God is salvation." Jesus' own name was a sign that he was there to "save his people from their sins."

In Luke's introduction to the story of Jesus, he echoes Matthew's desire to tell how Jesus was to save the people's sins. But, he focuses more on a complementary player to the story. Jewish tradition has it that before the coming of the anointed one of God--aka the *Messiah*, the *Christ*--the prophet Elijah would return to earth to prepare the people. The prophet Isaiah (40:3-4) names that there will be one to come who will "cry out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord." It is the prophet Malachi (4:5-6) who names that prophet as Elijah. Luke picks up on that thread, and gives the story about how the parents of John the Baptizer were told that John would play this role. An angel appears to Zechariah, John's father, and tells him that his son,

will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (1:16-17)

Once John is born, Zechariah echoes this in the beautiful "song" Luke tells us he prophesied to his son. Inasmuch as these words tell us about the

call of John, and his purpose by God, we are told why God must be embodied in Jesus. In his song to his son, Zechariah lists at least two purposes for the coming of the messiah. He must come to rescue the people from their enemies (the aforementioned Roman occupiers and the compromised Jewish leaders). But equally so, the child is coming to turn people back into right-relationship with God. While powers and principalities can be persuasive, for their ways to draw upon the hearts of the people, the people must be lost and have turned away from God. 2000 years ago, many called themselves faithful Jews, but their actions didn't show it. (I posit that in our time, there are a healthy number of people who call themselves devout Christians, but the way they treat others makes it hard-pressed to believe it.)

So, in Luke's vision, John was called to "tell (the coming messiah's) people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins." (1:77)

Then, it continues, "Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace." (78-9)

And this, according to Luke, was so important to God, that God needed to live and dwell amongst the community. And it so happened that God became the Jewish man named Jesus, who would hail from the town of Nazareth.

According to multiple commentaries I read, once Jesus came, and brought the good news of salvation to the people, and delivered that message

through his death and resurrection, it was enough...it was completed for all time. There were many who experienced Jesus, and others who came in a subsequent generation or two, who firmly believed that after his ascension into heaven, Jesus would return and fully make all of the earth the way God intends it to be. Some contend that that time is still yet to come. I happen to believe that Jesus gave us all the tools each generation has needed since he walked the earth, to draw ourselves closer to God. He proclaimed that (what I call) the “kin-dom of God” was present on earth in himself. In order to claim it, one needed to heed his teachings, and each gospel, in its own way seeks to drive that point home. It matters that God was embodied in Jesus when God did that. But the purpose of Jesus coming when he did holds just as much meaning in every age. It is up to each of us, to explore why Jesus said what he said and did what he did. But we must explore Jesus for ourselves. We cannot let the “religious experts” or “tradition” make up our minds for us. You and I must allow our unique lives to intersect Jesus, and also allow Jesus to read our world, and help us understand how to most faithfully live into it. And, that is why it is so important for me to do this series - I’m finding the need to re-claim Jesus from all of the heretical views that I hear spoken from some pretty powerful places. But most of all, I’m doing it so that I can follow the oft-repeated calls of John and Jesus to change my heart and life, in order to live in the kin-dom of heaven as it is here on earth. I hope you all will enjoy the exploration with me. Amen.