

## **Matthew 18**

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. 20 As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

23 Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
And they will call him, Emmanuel.[a]  
(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

24 When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. 25 But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

## **Luke 2**

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. 2 This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. 3 Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. 4 Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. 5 He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. 6 While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. 7 She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

8 Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. 9 The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. 11 Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. 12 This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, 14 "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

15 When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." 16 They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. 18 Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. 20 The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

## **Sermon**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

As I write this, I'm at the hospital in Salem supporting one of our members in a routine surgery. I've learned to say routine rather than minor because, as one of my friends says, routine things happen regularly but no surgery is minor if you're having it! On this week before Christmas, there's a sense of urgency in the air, though not necessarily for the same reasons Joseph and Mary made an urgent trip to Bethlehem. The urgency all around seems wrapped up in glossy paper, tied up in boisterous bows. It's all about stuff. What stuff you're buying. What stuff you'll receive. Stuff seems to rule the day.

It's fitting, then, that on Christmas Jesus is stuffed into a manger rather than born in the nearby birthing unit. Rather

than center stage, Jesus is marginalized, even on the very first Christmas. Though heaven sends angels to greet him, shepherds - the most blue collar of workers in ancient Israel - and their sheep are the only earthly creatures to welcome the newborn king. You might want to say the Magi, but remember, they don't show up until Jesus is a toddler, a year or two into his life. Jesus, the main event, is used to being treated as a side show. This doesn't excuse us or our obsessions with accumulating things; rather, it reveals the graceful nature with which Christ was born, already willing to deal with our distracted nature. Jesus belongs at the center of the temple of our lives, the Jerusalem of our hearts, so of course he's born in Bethlehem, outside the city walls and away from pomp and circumstance. The incarnation happens at the edges of society. In the incarnation, God enters into the center of our human condition and we push the Lord to the margins of our lives

This word, **incarnation**, is one that deserves some attention. Let's just say it again: **incarnation**. It could be so many things! In a nation full of cars?! Nope, that's not it. Inside of a flower!? Wait! No no no. Inside one of those cans of instant breakfast. Wrong again. In...*carne asada*. I love Mexican food! Still wrong, though, that is the closest to the meaning of the theological meaning of the word.

Incarnation comes from a latin word used to describe what God does in Jesus, and the root word is *carne*. Yes, like the meat. Perhaps everything holy comes back to Latino cuisine. *Carne* properly means *flesh*, so the in-*carne* is when God gets flesh, God becomes enfleshed, when God gets a body. We can't underestimate the importance of this moment in history. Before Mary's pregnancy, God didn't have a body. God appeared sometimes in bodily forms, but those weren't God's bodies because they were apparitions, avatars if you will. They were bodies that God appeared in

but wasn't born in and surely didn't stay in. What separates Jesus's body is that this body is full of God, and therefore, God fully experiences what it's like to be human.

What's it like to be a hungry infant and not have the language to tell your mother of your need? What's it like to be an energetic child who wants to play despite his papa's exhaustion after a full day of manual labor in the carpenter's shop? What's it like to have to preach at the synagogue but have gotten no sleep, have little voice because of a terrible flu, and have a congregation full of Pharisees trying to point out how wrong you are according to the Law? God knows these things because God faced these things in Jesus. In the incarnation, God experiences the fullness of what it means to be a fleshly creature, to be a human person.

What begins today, with Jesus's birth, is nothing short of a revolution. We could call it, *The Legend of Holy Carne*.

What God comes to know more radically than anything else is dependence. That's right. Mary, not God, gave birth to Jesus, who is God. Mary and Joseph together raised God in Christ from an infant to a child to an adult. God relied on the Jewish community to instill in this man cub – yes, that's a Jungle Book reference – a love for the scriptures and a passion for justice. In Jesus, God learned to depend on others out of a necessity that God chose. When God chose the incarnation, God chose to become dependent, to take the risk of relying on others.

God chose this fleshly existence, but it's not just an experiment. This wasn't simply a divine curiosity. There's a purpose at the heart of God's Christmas incarnation. In Jesus, God comes to highlight the vitality, the integrity, of human nature. These creatures are made in God's image, body and soul, and so body and soul are holy. Our bodies matter to God. This is why Jesus isn't just born in a physical

body, but raised in a physical body, one that Thomas touches and even carries the scars of the crucifixion. These bodies matter to God because our matter, our meat, is meant for eternity along with our soul. We're embodied souls, and we're meant to be that way. God's made us this way and, in Jesus, God reminds us that this is no mistake, but the crown of creation.

So, dear friends, on this Christmas, remember that your bodies matter, as do the bodies of everyone else you meet. Treat them as such. Now, I'm not here to tell you to avoid all the tasty treats of the holidays. Part of being an embodied soul is tasting the delicacies of the season. Another part is physical activity, making time for healthier bodies so that the feasts don't negatively affect our frames. Still another part is working out your mind, reading and thinking and conversing with others to keep the synapses of your brain firing. Still even more, with your mind and body, take time to

be innovative. Create new things. Never let the creative spirit of your childhood die, because that's when our minds are most like the creative, compassionate Christ we follow.

This also means, when you see bodies suffering, work to alleviate that suffering. Be like the magi, who when they eventually come to find Jesus, bring gifts to help strengthen his body and prepare him for what comes next. Be like Mary, who hears the cries of hunger and meets the needs of our Savior with her own body. Be like Jesus, who as he grows in life, always finds a way to alleviate the suffering he encounters. Treat these bodies like they have eternal significance, because in creation and in Bethlehem's manger God gave these human bodies eternal significance. That's the bodily revolution we encounter on Christmas.

The Legend of Holy Carne is that God descends into our world of depression and eating disorders, of anxiety and

drug addiction, of body image issues and intimate partner violence, of war and capital punishment and of every other way we mistreat our God-given bodies, and God says, "this is still a body I want, because it is a body that deserves much, much more." God gets a body. God calls all of our bodies holy, and calls us to treat them with such dignity. Calls us to have compassion on those whose bodies fail them and to call to account those who use and abuse the bodies of others. On Christmas, the one who doesn't need a body, chooses a body just like ours, and therefore chooses needs just like ours. Miraculously, this is how salvation enters our world. Through that ridiculous choice of love and compassion, redemption is born in God's body, and in ours. Amen.