

Now in Flesh

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On Christmas Eve María and I did some last-minute shopping. Walking through the mall reminded me of my aversion to certain types of crowds. I can enjoy crowds of people I know, or crowds of people gathered for a common purpose — like a baseball game or a rally — or church, for that matter. The crowds at the mall are different. The only common purpose is consumption. Everyone is in a hurry — except for the person in front of you. And driving around the mall parking lot can really diminish your perspective on the essential goodness of humanity.

I used to dread going with María to the half-off sales at Goodwill. The aisles are too crowded anyway, and with throngs of people crowded in, I feel trapped. I start to understand what Harry Reid said about the smell of tourists in the summer.

At times like that, I have a hard time appreciating humanity. And that gives me a little different perspective on incarnation. Why would God want to become a part of this? Why leave the sweet ambrosia of a celestial existence for the smells and sounds of Earth? Why first encounter the world in the rough hands of a back-water carpenter?

Imagine Jesus' first night on earth — less evergreen and candy-cane — more manure and shepherd sweat. Less lowing, more mooing.

Why choose this? Why enter into the world in this way? Beyond that, why enter this world at all?

When I was discussing this sermon with some friends the other day, I said, "I'm preaching about the same thing I always preach about: incarnation." I suspect that incarnation is latent in everything I've said from this pulpit over the last 14 months. I've spoken to you of being the body of Christ — of prolonging his presence on earth. This is all incarnation. This is Christmas, over and over again — this is making the intersection of heaven and Earth that happened 2,000 years ago a permanent reality.

Why would God be so particular as to choose one religion, one culture, one people, one region, one time to bring the heavens and the Earth together? Why not come as an Inca or a Magyar or a Zulu or a Visigoth? Why not get to us earlier and show up as a caveman?

In order to become human, God had to be particular. If there was to be a tear in the veil between God and humanity, the tear had to start at one particular point. If God was to be human, God had to be one particular human. I don't know why, but God chose the pivot point in history to be the child of a Judean peasant girl. But the particularity of the incarnation is only a starting point. Through a self-limiting revelation, God became a part of the world. From that starting point, the entire Earth can come into a fuller connection with God. Like a single drop of dye in water, or pulling at one thread that unravels a cloth, the incarnation of God as one human brought God into communion with all of humanity.

I've heard it claimed that God became human so that we can become more like God. I'd put it a different way — God became human so that we could become more fully human. Jesus showed and taught us what it means to be what God intends us to be. He lived as a connection point — as a sacrament — a place where the Earth could directly encounter God. In him, the fullness of God was revealed. In the same way, we can know the fullness of our humanity by opening ourselves and the world around us to God. As we become brothers and sisters of Christ, we become children of God. Through Christ, the incarnation was not only particular to the man Jesus, but it also became universal — that is, Christ can be incarnate in anyone, any culture, any place.

Some of the worst parts of human history have resulted from attempts to turn the “other” into ourselves — something like a reverse incarnation. Conflating a culture, a race or ethnicity, a language with Christ means that rather than sharing the image of Christ with others, we impose our own image upon them. The history books are full of this type of story. Imperialism, expanding empires, racism, genocide — often sanitized in the name of Christianity. But when Christ came to us, he bore the culture, the race, the language and the religion of the people he came to — he became a Jew, a Palestinian, a first century carpenter — because Israel became his home.

One familiar example of imperialism under the flag of Christianity was the European conquest of America. Native peoples were killed and subjugated, and many were forcibly converted to a European version of Christianity. Simultaneously, however, there were priests and missionaries that had a

different understanding of incarnation. To the best of their understanding, they offered the image of Christ within an indigenous context. They blended stories of Jesus with native language and culture. We sang one such example of that blending earlier in the service.¹

One of my favorite examples of that blending is the cathedral music that originated in Central American cathedrals during the conquest, much of which is only recently coming to light and being performed again. Priests composed renaissance polyphony, but used Mesoamerican languages and rhythms to carry scriptural stories. They trained indigenous choir members in western music theory, and those singers began composing their own choral music in idioms that were comprehensible to them. These priests offered a Christ that the people could comprehend. It was not a white, European Christ — but a Christ that spoke their language and danced to their beat.

This understanding of incarnation also found expression through the Virgin of Guadalupe. In 1531, the farmer Juan Diego had a vision of Mary, mother of Jesus, not as she was depicted in European art, but as a dark-skinned Mexican woman. She was surrounded by the religious imagery associated with an Aztec goddess who was known as the Mother of the Gods. The woman through whom Jesus became human — the person in whom Christ was made flesh — was one of “us,” not one of “them.” Prior to 1531, there had been very few converts to Catholicism. By 1539 there were some 8 million Aztec Christians.²

¹ “Twas in the moon of wintertime,” St. Jean de Brebeuf, ca. 1643, *Hymnal: A Worship Book* 190.

² For examples of these blending musical and cultural idioms as well as more information on the Virgin of Guadalupe, visit <http://savae.org/virgen.html>

As a result of the efforts of missionaries that indigenized Christianity and the identification of native peoples with a central figure of the faith, Latin American has become a stronghold of Christianity. And by the late 20th Century theological developments like liberation theology have originated in Latin America and shown a new face of Christ to the rest of the world.

How do we bear the incarnation? Do we worry that sharing our faith will mean imposing our own image upon others? Can we imagine extending participation in Christ's body beyond our cultural assumptions? What would it mean to incarnate Christ into the places in the world that are hurting? To our own neighborhoods, where there is violence, poverty and hunger? What would it mean to our encounters with other cultures if we stop expecting them to act more like us and instead learned their language and ate their food? What would it mean to the Earth if we stopped imposing our own image upon it by carving it up and forcing it to work, and instead cared for it, and sought God's intentions for it?

This is the story of Christmas: that God became like us — became one of us — and stayed with us a little while. In the messiness of human life, he showed us what it means to be fully human. In prolonging that incarnation, we bring this planet into a fuller relationship with God.