

“Incarnation: Jesus, Specifically”

Isaiah 53:1-4; John 1:1-4, 14; Matthew 1:1-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 7, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that in seeking you in Jesus, we might find you also in one another. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us.” That line right there, from the opening to the gospel of John, is why we are here today. In some ways, it’s why we’re always here. One could argue that it’s the very core of Christianity. So for this month, we’re going to center our worship on this idea, the Incarnation. Maybe that word sounds long and complex. But it’s really just talking about God taking on human flesh. Before you let it intimidate you, just remember that the word *Incarnation* shares roots with the word *carne asada*! God put some meat on some bones and lived among us.

So as we get started today, we’re going to explore one very central truth about the Incarnation: there is no way to take on flesh in the abstract. That is sort of the whole point. Taking on flesh requires becoming a specific person. There is no generic person that encompasses the realities of all people. To be a person is to be a specific person, in this case, Jesus of Nazareth. So let’s think about the specifics that made Jesus the human person he was. To help us do that, I created a worksheet for you. Let’s pass these out, and for now, make sure you’re looking at the side that’s about Jesus. We’ll get to you a little later. ...

There are lots of categories we could use to list the specifics of who Jesus was. You can write these in as you feel like it. (I'll let you fill in your "zero to five" answers later.) There are some obvious ones to start with. In the category of gender, Jesus was male, which makes sense because he probably wouldn't have been allowed to study Torah if he were female. In the category of religion, Jesus was Jewish. At the time, of course, that also correlated with the political status of being part of an occupied nation, so worse than a second-class citizen.

But let's look what our scripture lessons today told us about him, because the categories they suggest are a little more complex. Isaiah talks about the Messiah having "no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." If "looks" are a category, Isaiah seems to be telling us that Jesus was average, or even ugly, since it says a verse later that he was "one from whom others hide their faces." I'm not sure how that sits with you though. How do you feel about the Bible suggesting that Jesus was probably ugly?

The other day, my friend BJ posted one of those memes that reflect on how our behavior so often doesn't reflect our aspirations. The meme said something like, Me: "I think I'll go to bed early tonight." But then Me at midnight was shown googling "How tall was Jesus?" And in the comments, one of BJ's friends had actually googled "how tall was Jesus," and it was striking to me how sharply the result prodded my defenses. Because the answer that showed up was "He may have stood about 5-ft. -5-in. (166 cm) tall, the average man's height at the time." And my Jesus-loving brain immediately

wanted to protest: Why would you assume Jesus was average?! He was probably tall! Of course everyone had to look up to him, because he was probably really tall!

But then I thought about what Isaiah said. Was Jesus probably tall? Could he have been of average height? Or is it possible he was even shorter than average, since according to Isaiah, nobody held him of any account? So what do we put in this category? If the category is looks, we might want to put “good-looking”. But does Isaiah make you think you probably need to write “short and homely”? The gospels make clear that he didn’t have any trouble getting people to follow him, so if he wasn’t good-looking, he was apparently charismatic enough to overcome it. These sorts of considerations tie into that last column where you’re asked to guess how that particular characteristic of Jesus influenced his status.

The reading we heard from Matthew brings up an even stickier issue. I suppose category here could be “family of origin” or even “pedigree.” You might think that Matthew listing Jesus’ ancestors all the way back to Abraham was a way of clarifying his bonafides to be the Messiah. But scholars have consistently pointed out that there’s something else going on here as well. There are four women referenced in this genealogy, and all four of them are connected to less than reputable circumstances. Tamar was the mother of Judah’s twins Perez and Zerah. But she was also his twice-widowed daughter-in-law, who tricked him into sleeping with her after he denied her the right to marry his last living son, as per custom. Rahab, the wife of Salmon and mother of Boaz, is conflated with the Rahab who assisted the Hebrew spies scouting out Jericho,

the same Rahab who is, by tradition, considered a prostitute. Boaz's wife Ruth, of course, is the Gentile daughter-in-law of Naomi, bringing strains of foreign blood into this genealogy of the Messiah. And then, of course, the final woman isn't even mentioned by name, because somehow for Matthew, the important thing about Bathsheba was that she was the wife of Uriah, the commander King David had killed in battle before he could discover that his king had impregnated his wife.

What was Matthew trying to do here? Are these women mentioned in order to make more sense of the way this genealogy ends? Because it doesn't end by saying, "Jacob the father of Joseph, and Joseph the father of Jesus, who is called the Messiah," does it? It says, "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." All of those ancestors, just to have Joseph end up as Jesus's mom's husband.

How do we put all this into a chart? Is the category "family origins"? It is "pedigree"? Either way, it seems like the answer is something like "sketchy" or at least "not quite traditional." Did this genealogy increase Jesus' status, or was it yet another thing he would have to overcome? Could it be both? Not in a way that they canceled each other out, but rather in a way that required that he was always aware of the dynamics his family tree created. How central was it to Jesus' identity? Did it help nurture his compassion for others whom society had deemed unseemly or indecent? Did remembering the stories of how God had redeemed his grandmothers' circumstances give him courage when he was worried he might not be up to the task?

We start to see how the specifics of taking on flesh can get complicated fast. The place we find ourselves in each of a multitude of categories shape who we are, how we move in the world, and how others see us. So let's take some time to think about this manifests in our own lives. On the other side of that worksheet is a chart you can fill out for yourself. There are so many categories to choose from: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, education, appearance, age or generation which are not quite the same thing, place of origin, marital status, occupation, the condition of your health. Some of these categories are more central than others at different times in our lives. Some of them may not feel particularly central to your identity, and yet could have quite an influence on your status in society. Many of them are things we don't have much control over at all, which can be an unsettling feeling for those of us who tend to believe our lives are our own to shape.

We can't take time to complete the worksheet right now, but I hope you will spend some time with it this afternoon, because knowing who you are matters. The specificity of our flesh matters. If we are going to live out an incarnational faith, we have to believe that God is trying to work through the specifics of who each of us is. If you are an older, white man, live your life in such way that you share the love of God as best you can through your older-white-man-ness. If you are a non-binary disabled person of rural origin, live your life so that God's love shines through all of those categories as clearly as possible. God wanted to live among us, and that requires specificity. God still wants to live among us, and your specificity is part of how that is possible.

We don't have to be good looking. We don't have to have a sterling pedigree. We don't even have to have the charisma to overcome whatever disadvantages we have, because God can work through people without legions of followers too. We just have to be who we are, trusting that the specifics of our being are precious to God and gifts that God can use to spread love and mercy and justice. Jesus showed us how, but the recalling specificity of his life also shows us that there are as many ways to share God's love as there are different people in the world. Be you, fully and truly you, you in the flesh, you in spirit, you shining in the eyes of God's love. Hallelujah and Amen.