

## The Difference of the Incarnation

Jonathan K. Dodson | Luke 2:15-21 | December 18, 2016

Have you ever been doing something you love, something you typically get excited to do, and in the midst of doing it begin to see through it? A relationship, a pastime, maybe even your faith, and then your go-to thing starts to fray, peels off, and suddenly you get a glimpse of what's underneath it, nothing. It's flat. The fizz is gone. The jarring moment when your joy leaks out and it hits you that there has to be more. Maybe this is how you feel about Christmas this year. *This story* gets underneath those things, past the fleeting joys, to connect us to realities that satisfy. We've been considering the difference of Christmas—a different ruler, a different kingdom, and now *a different life*. To get it, let's consider the *story*, its *reason*, and a *response*. Story, Reason, Response.

### The Story

We enter the story right after a riveting scene, where rough and tough shepherds are tending to their sheep in an open field covered by a canopy of darkness. Then, suddenly, a great light rips through the nighttime sky. It's not a meteor shower; it's "[the glory of the Lord shone all around them.](#)" The word "shone around" is used of St. Paul's conversion, who describes seeing "[a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me](#)" (Acts 26:13). The light left him blind but opened his eyes to something so great he abandoned Christian persecution for leading the Christian mission! The shepherds are plunged into this light, stronger than our sun. The sheep must have gone nuts. And then an angel appears and announces good news of great joy...wait for it... go see a baby wrapped in bits of cloth lying in a feeding trough, he's the Messiah of God. The angels break out in song and then [go away from them into heaven](#) (15). Notice the motion. Angels *go away*. Shepherds *go over to Bethlehem*—why?—[to see this thing that has happened](#). This thing. What thing? You know the thing. No, I don't know the thing. And they jump in their cars and speed over to Bethlehem—with haste—to find the thing, Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. Everything comes to a screeching halt. Slo-mo kicks in. The *motion* tells us [something](#). It's sudden halt *and* its elliptical movement. Something so significant is happening that it moves people around; they switch places, move out of their normal spheres. Young urban parents leave the comfort of Jerusalem for the discomfort of a cave or a stable. Angels leave the imperceptible celestial realm to become visible in earthly skies, and shepherds flee their fields to run into town. This is so important that people exchange places, risk jobs, reverse their calling. What is it? This [thing](#). The Greek word is *rhema*; which can mean event but also means *word*. [The thing is a word](#). A word from where? A word from God, "[Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us](#)" (15). It's a word that happens, an event, a promise. It's not just the light shattering the darkness, it's the Word become flesh (Jn 1:14). God wants to communicate with you so badly, he's willing to become just like you, a helpless mass of cells, cradled by wood and straw on a cold winter night.

### The Reason

Why? What's the reason for this thing, sometimes called *the incarnation*? Why would God become man? I'd like to give you three brief reasons. **#1 Reason can't get you to God.** On the face of it, the incarnation is illogical. The idea that Jesus is both God and man is

nonsensical, a challenge to the intellect, offensive even, and that must be passed through to get to God. So is the incarnation a contradiction? Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrestled with this deeply, calling it an Absolute Paradox, an absurdity, the strangest of all miracles, *but he did not locate the contradiction between reason and faith, but in something eternal becoming something temporal*. Eternal God in temporal man. Is it possible? We could discuss cosmological theories to make a case for this, but consider something more common. Have you set out, say at the beginning of a year, to become a certain kind of person—more loving, more just, more forgiving, more merciful—only to falling short of these eternal ideals of love, justice, mercy? You get them but fail to make progress in them, temporal reality falls short of eternal ideal? When that happens do you invalidate your ideals? Discredit love and mercy? Do away with justice? No, we make room for the tension, accommodate the paradox of bringing eternal ideals into space and time. So why not extend that to God? Eternal Being become helpless babe? Well, isn't that like believing in a square circle? Not exactly. We know a circle from a square when we see it, but do we know God from man? To say the Incarnation is irrational would require a reasonably clear conception of what it means to be God *and* what it means to be human. Do we know what it's like to be God? Do we fully grasp our nature? Not at all! Then our ignorance should give us pause in writing off the Absolute Paradox. Perhaps we should be making more room, not less, for things we cannot explain, for divine mystery. You see, reason cannot get us to God. But God can reveal himself to us. And just a few verses later, Simeon calls Jesus “[a light of revelation to the Gentiles.](#)” The Beam of God *become* flesh. God revealed. Ask anyone in this room who knows Jesus; they will tell you that they came to know him, not through possessing mere information, but through revelation, a deep spiritual sense, an encounter with Christ. Now, does this mean we dump the facts? The shepherds don't blindly believe and keep watching their sheep. They run to Bethlehem to fact check the angel's pronouncement. The time (this day), the place (city of David), the person (Christ the Lord *born*) all check out. God. With. Us. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child” (17). Few Christians see Jesus in this life, even fewer saw him as a child, *but the word spread*. Why? The facts checked out. God speaks. The *thing* happened. The Word has come. Reason can't get us to God, but God gets to us through revelation. The Word. **#2 Jesus came not just to identify with the humble of circumstance but to redeem the proud of heart.** Have you ever been falsely accused? Misrepresented? It hurts doesn't it? It makes you want to stand up and say this is who I really am. But do we really want people to know who we are? What would people think if they read a live feed of your every thought? Couldn't our response be, *I am actually worse than you think*. Israel knew this all too well. Thinking highly of themselves with their kings and lowly of themselves in exile, *but often thinking of themselves*. Is that you? When correction happens in our house, there are a range of responses. Some dig in, protest, fit and say *I would never do that!* Others sulk, pout, and say *I'm the worst person in the world*. Some do both, and both are proud. Simeon says, “[this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel](#)” (34) and [a glory to your people](#) (32). In response to Jesus, some will rise and some will fall. How do you rise? By Jesus coming low. He's the only one who can say *I would never do that*, and at the same time also say, *I'm the worst person in the world*, with sin of the world around his neck. Why did he come? To redeem the proud of heart. To take our sin and give us his glory. To envelop us with hope-filled righteousness, shining all around. The proud seek glory, but Jesus gives glory, his own flawless reputation

and beauty to people like you and me. The Word become flesh. Why the incarnation? Not just to identify with the lowly but to redeem the proud of heart. #3 Since God is eternally content within the three persons of the Trinity, he does not need anything from us. Why inconvenience himself in becoming man? **Because of sheer love.** Sheer love, from God to man? Kierkegaard reminds us a love affair between unequals is problematic. The king cannot marry a commoner. A love affair is strained when one is educated and the other is not, one is rich and one is poor, one is a royalty and one is not. Consider a powerful and wealthy king falls in love with a poor and lowly maiden. He worries that if he reveals his love for her, *she will love him back only for his power and resources*, and not for him as a person. So what does the king do? He takes on a disguise to identify with her, to communicate his love in a way that allows her to come to know what he is truly like. He puts aside the royal robes and takes up peasant attire in hope of consummating his love. This is the Incarnation, God head over heels, so madly in love, he'll put everything aside for you. The difference is, Jesus didn't don a disguise; he took on actual human form to pour out his love, to suffer our death, and give us himself, bring us into his glory. Sheer *love*.

### The Response

Three reasons for the incarnation. Now briefly our response. In the story there are two responses. Wonder and awe. **Wonder**, all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them (18). Now, the wonder isn't quite what you think. After Jesus preached his first sermon, Luke tells us crowds responded by *wondering* (same word) at the words falling from his lips, but within minutes they try to drive him off a cliff. *Fleeting wonder*. Ever experience this? Something so fascinating in the moment but quickly forgotten? I was going into a staff meeting, and I checked Twitter and saw a video of a man boxing a kangaroo. Clearly this was important. I clicked and was so mesmerized I had to interrupt our meeting twice to show our staff an Aussie man in a fist fight with a kangaroo standing on its hind legs. A couple weeks later I couldn't even remember what was so crucial in the moment. All who heard the word wondered, and then moved on. Today, we're easily distracted from the things that matter. Ever notice people at a concert these days, phones up and out, there but detached, removed? But Mary entered the story. She didn't have wonder; she had **awe**: "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (19). The word for *treasure* means to store information in one's mind for careful consideration. It means you find something so important that you commit it to memory and revisit it. What do you commit to memory? The stories and words of Jesus? If so, do you revisit them, treasure them, or just occasionally click through? Will you *ponder* Christ, the incarnation? This word *ponder* is used of Paul *conversing* with philosophers (Ac 17). Mary converses with *her heart* about Jesus. *Are you settling for transitory wonder or settling into lasting awe?* Joy leaks out when we don't sit with Jesus. Faith goes flat when we video the story but refuse to enter in. Go for a walk and talk to God, read a great book slowly, meditate on the Bible by turning verses into prayers. But don't love him for his power and resources. Love him for him. The Word made flesh out of sheer love. Insist on awe; don't settle for wonder. When you do, you'll return to your job like the shepherds, glorifying God and praising Christ.