



December 24, 2017 - Incarnation as Union

Given by Rev. Mattei

The angels sing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Lk 2: 14) while the Church wonders: What Child Is This?¹

The gospel of Luke along with the gospel of Matthew illustrate the birth of Jesus from the standpoint of the pregnant couple. But while Matthew describes king Herod's anxiety at the news of the newborn king and the travel of the Wise Men, Luke details the humble birth colored with political references and bucolic images. In Luke, it's the very pregnant mother that seems to attract our concern and focused attention before the glory of the delivery.

Perhaps Luke's professional background as a physician has given him sensible insight into the tragic experience of a woman forced to travel in her final days of pregnancy and deliver her precious baby in the only but unfit place a merciful innkeeper could offer to a crowded out couple: an animals' manger. However, Luke writes the story of the birth of Jesus only after having experienced Jesus' death and resurrection. He is aware of how Jesus lived and how his humanity has affirmed his divinity.

When we celebrate the birth of Jesus we need to remember that there is more to the babe of Bethlehem than the meeting point of heaven and earth, the combination of God and Nature. Jesus is the revelation of the divine *in* nature, the clear manifestation *in* nature of Life, the "Ground of Being"² who creates and re-creates, nurtures and sustains all that exists.

In Jesus God has taken suffering humanity and all of creation seriously, committing to a reliable and endearing Presence. In Jesus even God's Absence is experienced in faith.³ In Jesus God has shown us how much God is capable of loving. Connected to God, Jesus

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) hymn #296

² Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (1957)

³ Matthew 27:46

is more than Savior (Mt 1:21; Rom 8:37), the Rescuer who has come to fix what was broken.

Revealing God, Jesus is more than Messiah, the Mentor and Consultant who leads us to God (Ps 50:23; Is 30:21; 1 Cor 1:30). In fact, embodying God, Jesus is the long expected Spouse, the Emmanuel God-with-us, the Companion on the journey (Col 1:27; 3:4; Gal 2:20). Jesus is the Way and in his non-violent and all inclusive way of life we learn how to love.

In Jesus humanity has responded to Life with generous trust and faithfulness. In Jesus we are present to one another and interact with other people mindful of our common Origin and End (the Alpha and the Omega) and our everyday interdependence. This is what Jesus represents. This is the one in whom God delights. This is the one we follow. Church is the community of those committed to learn the ways of Jesus, to love God in other people in the present moment, in the “now” of life.

But all too often we have made of religion the training ground for the future reward of individual salvation. And we have called that reward “heaven.” Yet, the goal of religion must be kept simple and clear—love of God and neighbor, union with God and neighbor. Our common word for this state of union is *heaven*. Heaven is first of all *now* and therefore surely later. If God loves and accepts us now in our broken state, why would the divine policy change after our death?

The early Church has taught us that the enjoyment of heaven is the quality of union with Jesus now. If you are at home with Love then you are at the home of Love (i.e. Heaven). Heaven is earth transformed by love: earthly life lived in Love. Heaven is not a place of eternal rest or a long sleep-in, but a life of creativity and newness in Love. In Love suffering does not go unnoticed but is picked up and transformed into a foretaste of heaven. This transformation happens when we learn to see and hear from our inner core where divine union is realized. This is when our *likeness* of God in us is reconciled with our *image* of God in us and mirrors that image.

It is not a matter of accepting doctrinal truths: we all struggle with one line or the other of the Creeds of the Church.⁴ We don’t have to figure it all out or get everything right before our time on Earth expires. We just have to stay present and attentive to ourselves and to others on the earthly journey. None of us know how to be perfect, but we can practice staying in union, staying connected. “Remain in me and I remain in you,” says Jesus (see John 15:7). It is about abiding, not performing. It is about holding on to our

⁴ The Nicene Creed, The Apostles Creed, The Athanasius Creed

core identity more than perfect behavior—even if it were possible.⁵ Abiding in the God of Love means caring for suffering humanity.⁶

Every day we are given opportunities to love (whether we are in difficult situations or in pleasant ones): love is a decision and not a feeling. The harder and more challenging the situation the deeper we are called to grow in love with more creative ways, ways that are faithful to the gospel message and the compassionate and non-violent way of Jesus. The more we choose to love the more we abide in Love and grow in the ways of Love. This is heaven, this is union with God, this is the incarnation of the divine Word in created life.

Award-winning author and teacher Rabbi Rami Shapiro challenges us: “Will you engage this moment with kindness or with cruelty, with love or with fear, with generosity or scarcity, with a joyous heart or an embittered one? This is your choice and no one can make it for you. If you choose kindness, love, generosity, and joy, then you will discover in that choice the Kingdom of God, heaven, nirvana, this-worldly salvation. If you choose cruelty, fear, scarcity, and bitterness, then you will discover in that choice the hellish states of which so many religions speak. These are not ontological realities tucked away somewhere in space—these are existential realities playing out in your own mind. Heaven and hell are both inside of you. It is your choice that determines just where you will reside.”⁷

In Jesus God takes human suffering as well as the plight of a depleted Earth seriously. When heaven and earth meet, glory is given to God. May the birth of Jesus be an opportunity for a renewed humanity capable of expressing divine Love.

⁵ Fr. Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation

⁶ John 3:16; Philippians 2

⁷ Rami Shapiro, *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: Preparing to Practice*