

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. – John 1:1,14

We believe in Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary – The Apostles' Creed

Good Morning congregation. Grace and Peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ in this Advent season.

The Incarnation. What is it and what ramifications does it have on our lives as followers of Christ? The Virgin birth. We have probably heard about it, but why is it essential to our faith? These two questions are intertwined with one another and form the foundation for our faith in Jesus Christ being the divine only Son of our wonderful Creator God.

The Problem at Hand

As we know, the universe was created by our Triune God – driven by the creativity of God the Father, brought into form by the Word of God, and breathed to life by the Spirit of God – and in it God provided humanity with the power of choice and free will. Sure enough, one of the first things humanity did with free will was choose to disobey their loving God and thereby bring Sin into the world for all generations to come. Throughout the history of the chosen people of Israel, God provided a ritual of sacrifice of unblemished animals to cleanse the Israelites of the sins they had committed up to the point of the sacrifice. This process provided only a temporary, outward cleansing and became more ritual than life-transforming experience for God's chosen people. In order to provide for the full redemption of all people, a greater sacrifice had to be made – one unblemished human would need to be sacrificed for all of humanity in order to provide a lasting, inward cleansing. The book of Hebrews sums the problem and solution as follows:

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

– Hebrews 9:13-14

But how would Christ, the Word of God, the Second member of the Triune Godhead, he who was active in the creation of the world be able to be sacrificed in the temporal world of humanity? The answer is: the Incarnation.

What is the Incarnation?

The Incarnation is the process by which the divine Word of God entered our temporal world and became a part of the humanity which had been initially brought into form by the Word himself. Instead of simply bestowing the Spirit of God on a human born by natural means, the Word came into being in the womb of the willing Virgin Mary. Thus was born into our world the baby Jesus on the upcoming Christmas Day. By virtue of the fact that Jesus came into being without the assistance of his earthly father Joseph, Jesus was fully the divine Word of God and fully the human son of the Virgin Mary. Being fully human, Jesus was born with the free will to choose to disobey the loving Creator God. However, being fully divine, Jesus was also born with ability to overcome the lure and temptation of Sin that had plighted all of humanity. With this power over Sin, Jesus lived a full human life and yet still became the unblemished sacrifice for all of humanity. The Word of God that brought into form the initial perfect and uncorrupted humans was now bringing the path by which humanity could return to an uncorrupted state.

What happens to our faith without belief in the Incarnation?

If Jesus had been born simply the son of Mary and Joseph and led by the Spirit of God, he would have been nothing more than a great prophet like Isaiah or Ezekiel. At times he – just like any of the prophets or any of us – would have succumbed to the temptation and lure of Sin. Even a single blemish would have prevented Jesus from being the perfect sacrifice for all of humanity. Without Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for all of humanity, sins would still only be outwardly cleansed via ritualistic sacrifice. Without Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for all of humanity, we would have no inward transformation of our nature and desires. Without Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for all of humanity, we would have no hope for being agents of true change in our world. And without the Incarnation, Jesus could not have been the perfect sacrifice for all of humanity.

What does the early church father St. Athanasius teach us about the Incarnation?

St. Athanasius lived in the fourth century and was an influential leader on matters of faith. He is best known for standing up to the most threatening heresy of that early church era and for writing a definitive work on the matter at hand entitled *On the Incarnation* that has been read and referenced by Christians through the ages since his day.

His work takes nearly 100 pages to fully explain what I am trying to explain to you this morning, but it does so in a very clear way that is readable by all. St. Athanasius begins by explaining our created nature, how it correlates with the fact that we have been created in the Image of God, and what would be required to avoid corrupting that Image:

"By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains

incorrupt. So is it affirmed in Wisdom: 'The keeping of His laws is the assurance of incorruption'" (St. Athanasius 30).

Being cursed by the power and thorn of Sin, the nature of our humanity alone is incapable of keeping the Law of God. We thereby corrupt the Image of God that has been bestowed upon us and sentence ourselves to death. As St. Athanasius more fully explains:

"Then, turning from eternal things to things corruptible, by counsel of the devil, they had become the cause of their own corruption in death; for, as I said before, though they were by nature subject to corruption, the grace of their union with the Word made them capable of escaping from the natural law, provided that they retained the beauty of innocence with which they were created" (St. Athanasius 30).

Thus, as our human nature is lured into disobedience by the glamour of Sin, we sentence ourselves to death by corrupting the Image of God with which we were perfectly created. Through the power of the Word of God we would have been able to overcome the law, but only if we had not already corrupted the Image of God. Since humanity had lost this innocence, we needed a way to be re-created and re-born in the Image of God. Turning to the solution to our problem, St. Athanasius details how the incarnation of the Word of God came to the Virgin:

"He could have revealed His divine majesty in some other and better way. No, He took *our* body, and not only so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless, virgin, without the agency of human father – a pure body, untainted by intercourse with man. He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which he was known and in which He dwelt" (St. Athanasius 34).

Planning to be the unblemished fully divine fully human sacrifice for all of humanity, the Word of God needed to come into the temporal world through an unblemished womb. By beginning in the womb, the Word of God was able insure the experience of a fully human life by living through the literal start of life until its painful end.

Lastly, St. Athanasius explains the important crux of why the Word of God had to assume the mortal body of humanity in order to truly redeem humanity.

"The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection" (St. Athanasius 35).

Thus, it was only by becoming the perfect sacrifice for his own creation that the Word of God was able to offer restoration, re-creation, and re-birth in the uncorrupted Image of God. This loving, servant-like, and parental nature of our Creator prompted the Word of God to encounter and suffer through the human existence in order to redeem the whole of humanity from their corrupted state.

How does all this affect our faith and our daily lives?

When we accept the redemption Christ offers to all, the Word of God incarnates himself into our lives:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

– Galatians 2:20

We are still fully human, not divine, and capable of disobedience. However, the point of our redemption and lasting, inward cleansing is to allow us to continually place our faith in the Son of God and be lead by his indwelling presence in our lives. Can you see the immediate ramifications of this? We become beacons of the Lord's light and grace to those around us. Others want to know what it is that makes us different and what drives us. We are enabled to effect change in our society and world through the guidance of Jesus who turned his society and

world upside down through his counter-cultural teachings and lifestyle. Jesus instructs us to be last instead of first, to lay down our lives for others, and to humble ourselves like children. Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of heaven is like workers who – whether they come in the morning, midday, or evening – all receive the same gift. Let us recognize that this gift is free to all who choose to accept it and let us bring the message of this gift to all people.

May the Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.