

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, come in Spirit, come in Truth;
come in Word, come in Bread and Wine; Come now, we pray. Amen.*

We love to tell stories about children, don't we? How they were born,
the cute things they say and do, how they grow up.
How hard is it to get you to show someone pictures of your grandchildren?
How hard is it to get you to talk about them, tell stories of their latest exploits?
If we were half as excited about Jesus as we are about our grandchildren,
our churches would be full.

But our experience of our grandchildren is much more vivid, isn't it?
Much more immediate, than our experience of Jesus.
That is something we can work on.
That's the invitation to a life of prayer, to a Jesus-centered life,
so that our stories about encounters with Jesus will spill out of us as easily
as those about our children and grandchildren.

And, as it happens, the story of Jesus begins with a child story,
the story of a baby born in extremely challenging circumstances
to a very young mother scarcely out of childhood herself;
the story of a baby whose birth was heralded by angels and
witnessed by shepherds, to whom foreign wise men brought gifts for a king.
Oh, we love to tell this story. The story of how that little baby became a refugee
with his parents from a violent leader, and spent his early years in Egypt.
The story of how that baby grew into a precocious adolescent who astonished
religious leaders at the temple with his wisdom and understanding.
The stories of how this young man went public at the age of thirty,
demonstrating spiritual power no one had ever seen before,
and teaching the ways of God – a God whom he called Abba, Father.
A man whom gradually people came to see was God,
God made flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. That's a story!

And it started with God's need for a mother.
God had a plan. God had a plan for reconciling his fallen creation to Himself.
But God couldn't do it from the outside – he had to do it from the inside.
He had to be one of those fallen creatures – and for that He needed a mother.

Now, I suppose Jesus could have just beamed into earth's atmosphere. Many would have preferred it that way – isn't nearly as messy as being born. But being born was part of the plan. Starting from scratch was part of the plan. If God was going to take on a human body, it was going to start from an egg. We don't ask too many questions about how that egg was fertilized – the angel Gabriel is vague on the details when Mary asks the logical questions – He just says: *"the power of the Most High will overshadow you."*

But if God's plan was to involve the divine self becoming humanly embodied, it was going to involve bodies. Lots of them. How odd that so much Christian tradition denies the flesh, and sexuality, when flesh is such an important part of God's plan. God doesn't seem to have a problem with human bodies. God made human bodies, in all their intricate design and complex functioning. God made the reproductive system in all its power and weirdness. And though our sacred story suggests that God skipped one part of that system in bringing this embryo about, that is the only human function passed over in bringing the Son of God to earth.

Now, I don't know why God used the human body, in all its fullness and frailness, to bring about God's plan of salvation. But I can take a guess with the best of them. And my guess is this: That God loves the creation God made, though it is fallen and chaotic, and less than what God created it to be. God loves us, though we are broken and self-oriented and capable of inflicting unimaginable harm upon our fellow man and fellow creatures. God loves the bodies he gave us, though they became subject to decay and death. God delights in the intricacy of all that God so brilliantly designed.

Would it make sense for God to bypass all this creation in the name of redeeming it? That would imply that this material, created world was somehow worthless – in which case, why go to all this trouble to make it right again? No, it only makes sense if we see that God so valued what God had made, even rebellious humanity, that He worked through this frail flesh to restore it to righteousness. And so the Lord of Life entered into human flesh at its most basic level, and grew from an egg in a young woman's womb. That's a story!

And her elderly cousin, who had never been able to have children,
was now also carrying her firstborn son – and he, whom the angel had foretold
would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from before birth,
he kicked like crazy when Mary entered the room...
even before birth, John knew who Jesus was. That's a story!

So what's your story? God is not through using bodies to accomplish God's
purposes. In the here and now, as we live out our embodied life on this earth,
we make God known in our bodies, through our bodies.
This world could only see Jesus once because a woman physically bore him into it.
It can only see Him now, as Christ's body, show Him forth.
No one else has a body like yours, a mind like yours, a personality like yours.
These are God's instruments to bring God's love and peace to a world
in desperate need of both.

We have the opportunity to bear the life of Christ in the world,
not in the same way that Mary did,
but through our own bodies, minds, gifts, circumstances, passions.
We have the opportunity to be filled with the Spirit of God when we gather here.
We have the opportunity to allow ourselves to be tuned by the Master, so that
we become alive to the presence of the Lord whenever we encounter it.

And when we encounter the presence of God, we have a story to tell.
We are children of God. Jesus said we have to become as children
to receive the Life God has for us – and children tell stories.
They make meaning of things by telling stories.
What stories of how God has touched you will you tell your children,
your grandchildren, your neighbors and friends?
Who doesn't love stories of children?

Amen.

Luke 1:26:45

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.