

“Breakthrough”

John 1:1–6, 14; Luke 2:21–38; Matthew 2:1–12

The true story

The story of Jesus did not begin at his birth, for Jesus has always been, is now, and forever shall be. As Paul wrote, “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). The child born to Mary was God enfleshed, no less God than the Father or the Spirit. Fully and completely God—though not all of God. Begotten not made. True God of true God. And yet truly human, taking on all the weaknesses of humanity.

When Jesus was presented at the temple, an old man saw the shadow that lay across the child’s birth even as he beheld the savior of the Jews and the whole world. Wise men came from faraway lands to pay homage to this child. . . . for nothing would ever be the same.

And so we turn to Jesus, whose birth we celebrate every year. Two millennia ago, God broke into human history, into a darkened world to rescue us from ourselves. That’s it, plain and simple. Jesus would do and be for us what we are unwilling and unable to do and be for ourselves, undiminished lovers of God and others. But there is a before and after to Christmas. Long before . . .

The Before

John begins his remarkable gospel with the simple, yet profoundly challenging words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” New Testament scholar N.T. Wright helps us to see the significance of John’s word choice:

[John begins with] the unforgettable opening words: ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ At once we know that we are entering a place which is both familiar and strange. ‘In the beginning’—no Bible reader could see that phrase and not think at once of the start of Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ Whatever else John is going to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in one place and time. This book is about the creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.

And it will do this through ‘the Word’. In Genesis 1, the climax is the creation of humans, made in God’s image. In John 1, the climax is the arrival of a human being, the Word become ‘flesh’ . . .

In the Old Testament, God regularly acts by means of his ‘word’. What he says, happens—in Genesis itself, and regularly thereafter. ‘By the word of the Lord’, says the psalm, ‘the heavens were made’ (33:6). God’s word is the one thing that will last, even though people and plants wither and die (Isaiah 40:6–8); God’s word will go out of his mouth and bring life, healing and hope to Israel and the whole creation (Isaiah 55:10–11). That’s part of what lies behind John’s choice of ‘Word’ here, as a way of telling us who Jesus really is.¹

And then John goes on, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” Jesus as the creator of the universe? Yes, this is John’s claim. Bear in mind that John was a Jew and, hence, radically monotheistic in a pagan, polytheistic world. Yet, John has this to say about a man whom he had lived beside for nearly three years. To this day, many Christians have trouble truly embracing that nothing was made without Jesus. The Creator born to a young woman from Galilee? It seems preposterous.

Yet, such claims about Jesus began to be made not long after his death and resurrection. More than thirty years before the writing of John’s gospel, a Pharisee-turned-apostle named Paul wrote the following about Jesus:

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things



¹ Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (3–4). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

have been created through him and for him.¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)

Jesus made such claims about himself as well, for one day in the courtyards of the Jerusalem temple:

¹⁹ Jesus gave [his accusers] this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed.²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. (John 5:19-23).

Jesus’ listeners that day knew that when Jesus spoke of the “Father,” he was speaking of the LORD God, who had created everything, revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, and saved the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. And, yet, Jesus claims that whatever God does, he does; that he can only do what God does. That as God has the power of life, so Jesus has the power of life. That as God judges, Jesus judges. Whoever dishonors Jesus, dishonors God. . . . No wonder that some of Jesus’ fellow Jews were plotting to get rid of him. Jesus’ blasphemy couldn’t be tolerated. And blasphemy it simply had to be, for such claims couldn’t actually be true could they? In his commentary on the gospel of John, D. A. Carson puts it well: “In a theistic universe, such a statement belongs to one who is himself to be addressed as God, or to stark insanity.”

And then John goes on in verse 14 to make clear the implication of this claim:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”²

For a moment, this second claim about Jesus seems pretty straightforward, just the outworking of John’s opening claim about Jesus. But read v. 14 this way: “God became flesh.” This “enfleshing” of God, this incarnation, is beyond our comprehension. When we claim to truly understand how such a thing can be, we reveal only our own foolishness. We try to make sense of this, but our reason fails. After all, how could it really be that this one person, Jesus, is both God (1:1) and human (1:14), born to a young woman from Galilee and raised in a small village. In our pride we insist that it must make sense to us before we could accept it as true, so we insist on trying to figure it out. And sadly, we find ourselves wandering down an error-strewn path away from the Jesus-who-is.

Fully God and fully human?

Try to get your brain around that for a minute; both are claimed by John in his opening prologue. It isn’t surprising that the Christian community has always had to work through well-meaning but misguided attempts to explain how Jesus could be truly God and truly human at the same time. Over the last 2,000 years, some Christians have claimed that Jesus was the person closest to God, even the most God-like, but not really and truly God. Others have claimed that he only appeared to be human, but wasn’t really, truly human like you and me. They’ve all been busy trying to figure it out. And they’ve all failed.

Great councils of the church met to explain the serious errors about Jesus that undercut the Gospel; they sought to clarify what the whole of Scripture really teaches about Jesus, and what it doesn’t. I suppose that it is no surprise that the various claims about Jesus have proved to be some of the most contentious among Christians. To claim that Jesus is simply “fully God and fully human” seems almost like a copout (to some...).

Here are a few more ways Christians have gotten this wrong:

- One way some have tried to solve the mystery is by seeing Jesus as having only one, unique nature, a hybrid of sorts – the unique “God-man.” Of course, then he wouldn’t be truly God or truly human. It would be as if Jesus was a third “species.” That doesn’t really square with even the first verses of John’s prologue.
- Another way is to suggest that Jesus had a truly human body, but lacked a human rational mind or soul, instead being filled with the divine Logos/Word. Jesus then becomes “God in a bod,” again losing his true humanity. There is much more to being human than merely this bag of blood and bones.

² The phrasing “made his dwelling among us” refers to the Old Testament speaking of the LORD God “tabernacling” with his people, first, in the transportable tabernacle and then in the temple in Jerusalem. For John, it is a way of making absolutely clear his claim that YHWH, the God of the Israelites, and the Lord of all, was “en-fleshed” in this man, Jesus.

- Or perhaps Jesus is a perfect “moral union,” much like persons in a perfect marriage. One nature doing the “God stuff” and one nature doing the “human stuff.” Of course, he is then only half God and half human. For good reason, the church councils insisted that Jesus’ two natures are inseparable – not a right and left or top and bottom division of Jesus into two parts.
- Or still another choice . . . “Jesus’ humanity was like a drop of wine in an ocean of his divinity.” But then what remains of Jesus’ humanity? How can we speak of a “drop of humanity” in the Garden of Gethsemane? Jesus was fully and completely human; indeed, he was the most human, human.

It would be a mistake to see all this as so much pointless speculation. Christians have always known that answering the question, “Who is Jesus?” lies at the very heart of the Gospel. Christians of all stripes have wrestled with Scripture, trying to make sense of what is revealed there about Jesus. Yes, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). And yes, Jesus was born to a young woman from a small village in Galilee (Luke 1:26-38). The creed writers didn’t invent anything; they simply brought together the core teachings and practices of the early church which were grounded in the witness of the apostles, such as John. The great councils’ language expressed, in increasingly precise terms, those teachings and practices.

The great Christian confessions, including the UMC statement of faith, uphold two inseparable natures, divine & human, in one person, Jesus – sort of two “whats” and one “who.”³ That is who is born in a manger.

The After

Simeon was old. He was righteous, devout, and pretty much waiting to die. But he wanted to live long enough to see the salvation of Israel. Simeon knew that things were not right. He needed only to look up at the Roman soldiers standing atop the Antonia Fortress to be reminded, for the fortress sat adjacent to the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem. Israel had suffered for so long. But now, the Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he would live to see the realization of his hope. One day, on what must have felt a bit like an impulse, Simeon went to the temple. There, he saw a young woman, a girl really, with her husband. They were carrying a newborn into the temple to be consecrated. As soon as Simeon laid eyes on the child, he knew that he could die in peace, and exclaimed, “For my eyes have seen your salvation.” Simeon was not speaking of his personal salvation. Salvation for the Jews had nothing to do with “getting to heaven” or any other path to personal redemption. Instead, the salvation for which Simeon had been waiting was the salvation of Israel and, hence, the world. The child, this Messiah-child, would be the fulfillment of God’s promise that Israel would be redeemed from sin and restored to a right relationship with God. In other words, God had made a covenant with Israel and that covenant would be kept by the baby in Mary’s arms. And as had been promised to Abraham two millennia before (Genesis 12), all the world would be blessed through Israel. The baby was to be a light to the Gentiles every bit as much as to the Jews.

Despite the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph were astounded by the appearance of this old man and what he had to say. But Simeon went on. The baby would create turmoil not peace. Many would speak against him. Jesus would reveal what is really in people’s hearts which is, of course, often not very pretty. And, in a statement that surely cut to Mary’s heart, Simeon saw suffering ahead, saying to the new mother, “A sword will pierce your own soul as well.” It might be all angels and adoration now, but the coming of God’s kingdom would exact a high price.

Speaking for God

As Mary and Joseph tried to make sense of what Simeon had said to them, they were approached by an old woman. Anna was eighty-four and had been a widow for about as long as she could remember. Anna had the gift of speaking God’s word to the people of God. She was one of God’s prophets and never left the temple.

Anna too is overcome at the sight of the child. Like Simeon, she understands the meaning of this infant. Anna gives thanks to God and then uses her God-given gift to proclaim this Good News to everyone in the temple who looked forward to the salvation of Israel – which meant everyone who could hear her. In Israel at the time, perhaps the only Jews who did not anxiously await Israel’s redemption were those who had made their bed with the Romans, such as the Sadducees and other people of means who were doing quite well under Roman rule.

³ Using “what/nature” and “who/person,” Jesus is two “whats” (two natures, human and divine) and one “who” (Jesus). We can speak of the Trinity as one “what” (a single divine nature) and three “whos” (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Seeing with clear eyes

Despite their age, Anna and Simeon see the child in Mary's arms with clear eyes. They see the truth and are delighted by it. They see the arrival of Israel's rescue in this tiny newly born infant. They see . . . and believe.

You and I, and Luke's readers, cannot see the Christ-child as did Simeon and Anna. We are called to believe, to have faith in, that which we cannot see. But there is more to knowing than seeing, or hearing, or tasting, or touching, or smelling. God's cosmos is larger and more mysterious than that. The baby in Mary's arms is larger and more mysterious still, the one in whom "all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible . . ." (Colossians 1:16), the one who would be "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5), the one whom "every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of the God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

The light to the world

Simeon was waiting to behold "a light for revelation to Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). And that story begins soon after Mary and the small family leave the temple, for some months later they will receive a visit from three star-watchers from the east, each of them a Gentile.

The Christmas story told by Luke and Matthew is a Jewish story through and through – until Matthew comes to the story of the magi, the wise men, the star-trackers from the east. Their arrival is marked on the Christian calendar by the Feast of Epiphany, which is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, on January 6.

The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, meaning "manifestation" as in making someone or something readily apparent to the mind and the senses. Thus, Epiphany marks Jesus' unveiling for the entire world, for the magi are Gentiles. In the Christmas story, it is the magi who make it clear that the baby Jesus will not grow up merely to be the Jewish Messiah, but to be the savior of all humankind.

A long and difficult journey

The magi are star-watchers from the east, probably the lands of what was once Babylonia. In all, the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles. At times the magi and their retinue would have traveled through areas plagued with bandits. At other times, they would have passed through sparsely populated lands that offered little to eat or to drink. It would have been so much easier for them simply to stay home and wait for someone else to bring them whatever good news there might be. After all, they were men of great learning, prestige, and power. But despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the long journey, they chose not to stay, but to go.

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, they only had a vague idea where they were headed. Indeed, chances are that Bethlehem was a most unexpected destination. In Jesus' day, large communities of Jews still lived along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was once the center of the vast Babylonian empire. These Jews were the descendants of those who chose not to return to Jerusalem after the end of the exile in 538BC. The book of Esther is set in just such a post-exilic Jewish community in Persia (the successors to the Babylonians). Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that these three learned men were familiar with the great Hebrew Scroll of Isaiah.

Isaiah 60 speaks of a time when Jerusalem would be restored to greatness and wealth, when kings would come in procession, when other peoples would bring gifts of gold and silver, frankincense and myrrh. Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. What better place to find a new king than at the palace, the seat of power and wealth? Imagine the magi's surprise when a few of Herod's biblical scholars dug up the reference to Bethlehem as the place to find this new king. In terms of wealth and power, Bethlehem was dusty and inconsequential, worlds away from Herod and Jerusalem. Surely, the magi never expected to find the child in such a place. Yet, their surprise did not diminish their joy. Perhaps it even heightened their sense of awe and wonder.

In the moment, they knew to pay homage to Mary's child before presenting the gifts, as they will know not to reveal the family's location Herod. Even so, they could not grasp the deepest truth that they were to set their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before a child who bore the "exact imprint of God's very being," as the writer of Hebrews put it (1:3).

An "exact imprint"

If you have a coin in your pocket, you might pull it out for a moment. The coin will help us understand better what the writer of Hebrews meant by "an exact imprint."

The Greek word translated "exact imprint" is *charaktér*, from which we get our word "character." It is a word that was born in the world of engraving, particularly in the production of coins. In Jesus' day, the emperor would employ an

engraver to carve the emperor's portrait and a few words (such as "son of god") on a hard metal die or stamp. The engraver might carve a depiction of some notable event on another die. Then, the coin would be minted by placing a blank between the two dies and striking them with a large hammer. The resulting coin would be an exact impression of the original dies. The coin would be the perfect expression of the original. We can see how the word *charaktér* came to mean not only letters in the alphabet but also a person's essential qualities. And in Bethlehem, this "exact imprint" lay in a manger before grown men who have come a thousand miles to bring gifts and to worship. It should, it must, boggle our minds and challenge our hearts.

A public event

There is a lot of pressure these days to make Christmas a private celebration, as if it matters only for Christians. But Christmas is a public event, the most public event ever. When John sees Jesus coming to the Jordan River, he exclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). That is as public as it comes. It is through Jesus that the world is reconciled to God whether the world knows it or not.

Because much of the world doesn't know the truth, we have a story we must tell. A public story. Everyone's story. A story about the one true God who took upon himself our messy humanity so that we might live in a right and a loving relationship with him. Every Christmas we celebrate this story. Like the angels to the shepherds we want to proclaim to people everywhere that Jesus is Lord. That our God, their Creator, has given us a gift we could never measure. Sometimes in our desire to tell this story, we forget Peter's teaching: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). It is the gentle and respectful part that can be so hard for us.

Learning to live in a pluralistic world has not been easy for many of us. Must we rename a Christmas tree a Holiday tree? Must we withdraw Christmas from the public arena entirely? The challenge to Christians in our society is to learn how to be gentle and respectful with those who deny that Jesus is Lord, yet never surrender our claim that he is just that. How are we to be the light to the world? How are we to invite others into God's family? How are we to live out Christmas?