

God Comes Here

It may seem rather abrupt. But most Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, and most of the larger Protestant denominations, recognize the birth of Jesus on December 25th, His dedication and circumcision on the first Sunday in January, the appearance of the star to the wise men (Epiphany) on January 6th, and celebrate His baptism on the second Sunday in January. The question is, why so soon-- why jump ahead 30 years to His baptism? Why not spend more time thinking about Christmas or lessons from Jesus' childhood? What is the significance of looking at His birth, thinking about His circumcision, and then taking that quantum leap forward to Jesus' baptism?

The answer lies in discovering the common thread that ties all these events together. The answer is Incarnation. If you want to remember what the term "incarnation" means, look at the center of the word where you find "carn," which is Latin for "flesh." It's the same root word from which we get the word "carnivorous" or "carnivore." We say that some animals, like Tigers, are carnivorous, which means they eat just flesh; while other animals, like cows, are herbivorous, and eat just plants. Most of you are like me: We'll eat just about anything!

But the word "Incarnation" in Christianity means that God became flesh in Jesus Christ. He was physically formed in Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit and was born into the world as a fully human child. And because He was born into a Jewish family, He was dedicated to God and circumcised eight days after His birth—we don't often meditate on that fact but we should. We should take this knowledge in because it is another sign that He was a fully human child.

2

Regarding His circumcision, did you know that this procedure was traditionally done without anesthesia and sometimes still is? Other surgical procedures were and, in some places still are, done on infants without anesthesia. The reason for this is that it was widely believed that very little babies didn't experience pain the same way children and adults do. This belief was based on the fact that children and adults have no conscious memory of pain prior to 2 1/2--3 years old. So, I can remember tumbling down the cellar stairs when I was 3 and the pain of hypodermic needles when I was 5, but I can't remember my circumcision [thank God] or any other painful experiences that occurred when I was still in diapers.

Do you know why we can't remember anything from our infancies? The answer has to do with the formation of language. Babies can't talk and because they can't talk, even to themselves, they lack the mechanism by which information is stored in the higher brain for later retrieval. Conscious or explicit memory requires language and where there is no language there is no conscious memory.

Think about it. You can only bring to conscious memory what you were able to put into words. That's also why some people have no conscious memory of some very traumatic experiences they had as children or as adults. Sometimes what we are going through is so horrible that the higher functioning areas of our brains temporarily shut down. They do this in order to send all available energy to the more primitive parts of our brains dedicated to survival, to keep us breathing and our hearts beating. And, since such trauma shuts down the places where language is formed, the information related to the trauma cannot be restored for retrieval. Again, where there is no language there is no conscious memory.

3

But what medical scientists and neural biologists have discovered more recently is that the lack of conscious memory of pain doesn't mean that there is no pain or trauma. Our bodies remember things that our conscious minds cannot recall. Our brains store feelings that we lack the words to describe. Many now believe that little babies do experience pain and fear and a lot of other things. Even babies still in their mother's wombs can feel pain and, because of the umbilical connection, they are constantly bathed with the same chemical markers and electrical impulses present in their mothers. Infants in the womb can feel the effects of stress hormones raging through their mothers when their mothers are upset. The infant shares chemically the sadness and joy of her mother. He is affected when she is being soothed and when she's angry. And, all of this information is stored in the chemistry of the child, affecting his emotional development, sense of well-being and ability to thrive in the world even before he is born into it.

But one thing I want you hold on to this morning is this: The infant Jesus fully experienced His coming into the world, the trauma of birth in the stable and all the events that surrounded it; and, He felt the pain inflicted on Him at His dedication. This is all part and parcel of the Incarnation, the wonder and the horror, the price of becoming a fully human, human being. It also means that Jesus is no stranger to the deep hidden and secret things in us that sometimes cause us to feel and act in ways we don't fully understand. It also means that no pain or trauma is too deep for Him to touch, for Him to heal. It is very significant that our Lord Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day after his birth in accordance with the Law of Moses.

So Jesus came to and was born from the water of Mary's womb. Then Jesus was circumcised. And,

then, Jesus was baptized. Picture it as best you can. John the Baptist had appeared on the scene, preaching the need for people to repent of their sins, and baptizing as many who showed signs of doing so. Jesus went out to be baptized by John. Matthew 3:13-15 say, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented."

Jesus' baptism was both an acknowledgment of His humanity and a sign of His identification with our humanity. As far as it goes, John the Baptist was absolutely right in saying what he said to Jesus: Jesus had no sin to repent of and no need to be baptized as a sign of His repentance. But Jesus wasn't being baptized for His own sins but for ours. His entrance into the baptismal stream is the sign of His conscious commitment to enter into the stream of our humanity for the purpose of bringing us back to God.

It's like the hero I heard about last week, the young police officer who dove into icy water to save children from a car turned upside down in the river. He had to share their peril to save them. It's like the fireman who ventures into a burning building to rescue the grandmother trapped in her bedroom. He has to enter into her danger to bring her to safety. It's like coal miners who go back into a collapsed mine or like soldiers who return to the battlefield to save their comrades. They put themselves on the same turf to bring deliverance to those who cannot deliver themselves. You see, Jesus doesn't save us from the position of some ivory throne in heaven but by

entering our world, sharing our pain and tasting our death. This is the meaning of the "Incarnation" and God's plan for our salvation.

Then finally, as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we are reminded of what Jesus said: "This is my body; this is my blood." In other words, "this is my flesh and blood given for you." "This is why I came into this world and became a man--so I could give this man to you. Here I am. Eat My flesh; drink my blood; take me in that I might unite with you and you with me--that My flesh should become your flesh and My blood your blood--that you might experience My love and My forgiveness from the inside out, be born anew, and have everlasting life."

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Sermon for January 8, 2012

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Matthew 3:13-17

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