CHAPTER 5

God con Carne

Incarnation

So, it's on to Jesus.

That's the idea.

I guess we're going to talk about his cross and resurrection?

We certainly will, but first we're going to start with his birth.

Really? Christmas? I mean, his birth is what Christmas celebrates, right?

That's right.

Christmas, actually, is the one holiday we can celebrate in my family in relative peace. What's to fight about? Who can get upset about a baby? We'll even go to church together sometimes. Even my brother comes. It's nice with the candles and carols, and we enjoy giving each other gifts.

I think a lot of families celebrate Christmas that way. But you sound a little surprised.

I guess it makes sense to start here since we're following the biblical plotline. Jesus has to be born before he can do anything else. But I'm not sure how Christmas will help answer my questions about my friend and dad, about why there's so much suffering in the world and what God's going to do about it.

Would you be surprised if I said that the early Christians discussed, argued, and fought over what we celebrate at Christmas more than any other thing in the history of Christianity?

You've got to be kidding!

No. For most of the third and fourth centuries, the early Christians debated what we now sing about in our Christmas carols with candles glowing all around us.

That Jesus was born in a manger?

Yes. But specifically that, in Jesus, God became human.

Hmm. I think that's something I probably haven't thought about too much, to be honest. I know we call Jesus the Son of God, but I'm not sure I've thought about how Jesus can be both human and God at the same time. Or how God can be in heaven and on earth in Jesus at the same time. Or what you even mean when you say God became human.

Those are exactly the questions the early Christians were asking.

And this will help answer some of my questions? I realize that maybe there aren't complete answers, and I know that our discussion about sin helped describe the fallen world we live in, where people die of cancer and car accidents all the time, but I'd still like to hear more about how God is taking care of all this.

We've also talked about how God is at work continuing the creative activity of caring for the world through us, which is good to remember, too. But why don't we look at what Christians have said that God is up to in Jesus, and then see how this addresses your questions?

Sure, I'm willing to see how this plays out. But I've got one other question first, if that's okay.

Absolutely. Please go ahead.

Thanks, because I'd like to go back, for a minute, to where we left off with covenant, law, and community.

Okay.

Well, it seems like a good plan. God chooses Israel, starting with Abraham, and through them blesses the whole world. Lots of potential there.

The authors of the Old Testament thought so, too. So what's the question?

Well, what happened?

What do you mean?

I guess I'm wondering whether the plan failed.

Could you say a little more? I'm not following.

You know, the plan to restore relationship with humanity and bless the whole world through the covenant God made with Israel. I'm wondering if it failed. I mean, it became clear through our conversation that the ancient Israelites struggled a lot with holding up their end of the agreement. That's why the judges, kings, and prophets got involved.

Yes, it was definitely a bumpy road at times.

Like you said, though, that's true of most relationships. But if God goes and does a new thing with Jesus, then it feels like one of two things must have happened.

Yes?

Either the original plan with Israel failed and Jesus is part of plan B, or Jesus was part of the plan all along.

What do you think?

I'm really stuck. On the one hand, if the plan failed, you have to wonder whether God gave up on Israel. But that doesn't seem to be what the prophets think. And even more, it doesn't seem to be in character with the God we've been talking about. The God of Israel just doesn't seem like a quitter.

True enough.

On the other hand, if Jesus was always part of the plan, then why wait so long? Why go through all the heartache? Why not just start out with the new covenant we were talking about from the get-go? I mean, was it all just a game? Or did God really not know what was coming and had to improvise with Jesus?

These are great questions. Just the kind that Christians have struggled with through the ages.

It's always nice to be in good company!

You definitely are.

Part of the answer rests, I suppose, in whether you believe there was a plan in the first place.

What do you mean?

The questions you've framed all operate under the assumption that there's this divine plan God put in place, and we just watch as the various parts of it unfold.

You mean there *isn't* a plan?

Many Christians, and certainly a number of biblical authors, assume there is.

Okay then.

But there's a problem with that theory.

Yes?

What about human freedom?

What do you mean?

It's a question you raised earlier when we were talking about sin. You asked whether we are really free to sin or not sin, and it was a great question. It's worth asking again now with regard to God's plan. Do you see what I mean?

Not sure.

Think about this: If God has a divine plan that unfolds across the centuries, what does that say about us? Are we just playing various roles assigned to us? Do we have choices? Are we really free?

I hadn't really thought of that in this case. I've always found it kind of comforting to think that everything happens according to some kind of larger plan.

I think you're probably not alone in that. But what do you think now?

I think that I definitely *don't* like the idea of having no freedom, like we're all just cogs in some big machine, even if it's a divine machine. But does that mean God doesn't have a plan? That God's just reacting, making things up as God goes along?

How does that idea strike you?

To tell you the truth, not much better. As much as I value human freedom, I'd like to think there's a little more to what's going on here than one contingency plan after another or, worse, a series of random events.

I know what you mean: that's not a terribly comforting thought either.

And isn't God supposed to know everything? How do you balance that with human freedom?

Like I said, these are great questions.

Which is why I'm looking for a great answer! So what is it?

I'm not sure there is one.

What do you mean?

I mean, I don't think there is any clear or simple answer. The Bible—and here it's important to remember that the Bible is essentially a library with a number of books and authors—holds both positions and then some. Some writers believe that there is a plan and that God is in control. Some stress human freedom and responsibility. Some seem to think that there's an ultimate plan but lots of room for how it gets worked out in the meantime, while others suggest a kind of dynamic interplay between God's will and ours.

That's not very helpful.

Maybe not in terms of settling the issue once and for all, but I actually do find it kind of helpful in terms of making sense of my life in light of the Christian faith.

How so?

Well, I experience life as fairly complicated, and a lot of important things don't seem to fit into nice neat boxes. So I get a little leery when someone suggests a simple answer to really complex questions, and I appreciate that the biblical authors also found some things too difficult to reduce to simple categories. Not everything in life is black and white, and seeing different biblical authors come to different conclusions about these complex questions is kind of comforting.

I see what you mean, but wouldn't it be easier if they all just agreed?

From what you've said, it sounds like you don't always agree with your family members.

No, I don't.

What about your friends—do you agree with them all the time?

No. Of course not.

But you respect them.

Absolutely.

Do you ever find the disagreements helpful?

I suppose I do. Even the conversation we're having right now is shaped by the numerous conversations I've had with my sister and brother. We don't agree on all that much when it comes to religion, to be honest, but I'm still kind of carrying their opinions around with me as I think this through. And I bet that's true in general—that even if I don't think of it in the moment, over the long haul I probably think things through more and make better decisions because I'm around people who don't always just agree with me.

I think something similar is going on with the Bible. It's helpful to remember that the Bible, as we've said before, isn't a textbook with

facts or a constitution with laws. Instead, it is a collection of confessions of faith that, together, tell the story of God and the people of God. People made these confessions at various times in history and while facing all kinds of different situations. This naturally results in a variety of opinions and points of view. And while they might not always line up neatly, they give us a depth and breadth of perspective that helps us to apply our own faith to all the different circumstances we find ourselves in.

That goes back to the idea of a family scrapbook. We might have some crazy aunts and uncles who have contributed some unusual stuff, but it's still all part of what it means to be part of this family.

Exactly.

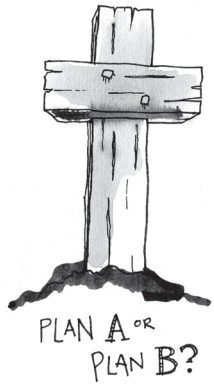
That's helpful, but I'm still interested in this question of whether God's original plan worked or failed, or whether there was any plan to begin with. I realize that maybe we can't settle the issue, but is there *anything* we can say?

I think that when you read the Bible carefully, it's clear that God is a God of love, that God is committed to this world and the people God created, and that God intends to restore our broken relationships with God and with each other.

There's the relationship thing again.

Right. Further, I think God made all those promises—both the big covenantal promises and also the many and varied small ones—precisely because God loves and is totally committed to restoring God's creation. At the same time, I don't think we know how that's going to work out, and I think God's left a lot of room for us to participate. Not just play a role, but actually participate in the world God made. And that means this: God may very well bring things to a good end, but it's probably going to be something of a wild ride in the meantime. So, you were looking for an answer. What do you think about that one?

I think "wild ride" would certainly be a pretty good name for the biblical history of ancient Israel so far. But what about Jesus? Is he part of the original plan, or is God improvising, starting over again with a new plan?



I think I'd rather talk about God's "promise" than "plan."

Why?

I'm just not sure "plan" is all that helpful. Again, "plan" feels more like a blueprint for human history and life. Not really what I experience. Is there a plan? Maybe. Who really knows? Does God make promises? Absolutely. Does God keep those promises? The Bible confesses that God does.

So Jesus is a part of God keeping God's promises?

I think that's a much better way of putting it. And if you thought it was a wild ride before, just wait.

What do you mean?

Well, as we've seen already, there are countless ups and downs in God's relationship with Israel.

I'll say! It's a lot more like a real relationship than you'd tend to think. I was especially amazed at some of the descriptions of God. Sure, there are places where God's portrayed as angry, but there were all those other images—God as a forlorn parent, as a betrayed lover, as a protective mother. The God of the Old Testament seems much more passionate—and so much more vulnerable—than I'd imagined.

Absolutely, and that's all about to crescendo in what happens with Jesus.

How so?

Christians confess that, in Jesus, God became human and took on our life and our situation in the world—sharing our hopes and dreams, vulnerability and limitations. This is what Christians call the doctrine of the Incarnation.

And this is what you said the early Christians fought about for nearly two centuries?

Yup.

Well, I've heard the word *incarnation* before, though I've never been totally sure what it means.

Incarnation is a big word, but knowing where it came from will help. In this case, it comes from two Latin words. The first part, *in*, means "into."

That's easy enough.

Sure is. And the second, *carne*, means "flesh."

"Flesh" as in "human flesh"?

Right. Flesh as in human flesh or, for that matter, animal flesh, like meat.

So that's where *chili con carne* comes from? Isn't that spicy stew with meat in it?

Yup. We've actually got a whole host of words that stem from that same root. *Carnal*—"of the flesh." *Carnivorous*—"flesh-eating." *Carnage*—"slaughter of flesh." Even *carnation*, which means "flesh-colored."

So *incarnation* literally means "into flesh." Like you were saying before, in Jesus, God became a human being?

That's exactly right. *Incarnation* literally means "God in the flesh" or, a little more crassly, "God with meat on."

God con carne? That takes a little getting used to. And like I said earlier, it's pretty confusing. I mean, isn't saying someone is both God and human a contradiction in terms?

There's a term for this kind of contradiction also. Something that seems like a contradiction but is nevertheless true is called a *paradox*. It's something that we can't entirely understand but still believe is very important.

I've heard my sister say something like that, and I've watched my brother get really mad when she does. He thinks that Christianity is always asking us to believe things we can't understand. And she thinks that part of being Christian is taking it all on faith.

I think I can sympathize a little with each of them. Like your sister, I don't think we can understand everything. We're talking about God after all. But, like your brother, I also don't think we should just believe it because someone tells us to. I do think there are some things that are worth believing, even if I can't understand them. I believe them because something important is at stake.

What do you mean?

Some things seem to communicate a truth that's really important. And so, even though I don't understand *how* it's true, it makes a difference when I believe it *is* true. It helps me make sense not only of the rest of the biblical story but also of my life. So I accept it's true even if it goes beyond what I can understand.

And you think that's the case with the Incarnation?

Yes, I do. Maybe sharing a couple of analogies, or stories, that try to get at the deeper truth of the Incarnation will help. No story can fully explain a paradox, and each has its own limitations, but sometimes they can help fill in the larger picture of what's at stake in the doctrine.

That sounds like a good idea.

Okay, then I'll try two pretty well-known ones. The first comes from a guy named Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who lived in the early nineteenth century. He described the Incarnation as being like a royal king who fell in love with a lowly serving girl. How could the king earn her love? He couldn't do it by a show of power, or she would be intimidated. And he couldn't just pour riches on her or decree that she was his equal. Then she might just love him for what

he could give her, not for who he really is. So he became a humble servant like her in order to win her genuine love. For Kierkegaard, that helped explain the paradox of the Incarnation. It tells us *why* God became human even if we can't understand *how*.

So Kierkegaard thought that God became human in order to win our love.

Right.

But God wanted our love for the right reasons. God became human so we wouldn't love God because we were afraid or just for what God can do for us, but we'd love God for who and what God really is.

Exactly.

That helps. It gives me a reason why Christians would believe this. And the other story?

I'm not sure who wrote this one. It's about a man, a farmer who never went to church, even though his wife did regularly. Well, one cold and blustery Christmas Eve, after his wife had again pleaded with him but couldn't convince him to come with her to church, he was reading comfortably by the fire when he heard a thudding against the windows of their house. He looked out and saw that sparrows, trying to get out of the cold harsh wind and attracted by the light and heat inside, were crashing into the windows of the house. He covered the windows, but that didn't work. So he decided to put on his coat, gloves, and hat and go out and open his barn doors wide so the birds could find sanctuary there. But they wouldn't come in. He put the lights on, but they didn't come. He spread a trail of cracker crumbs, but they wouldn't follow. He tried to shoo them in, but that only frightened them more.

"If only," he thought, "I could become a sparrow for a little while, I could lead them into the barn to safety." And in that moment he realized that's what Christmas Eve—the story of God being born as a human—was all about.

So in this story God comes to us in a form we can recognize and understand, in order to communicate to us and lead us to safety.

Right. It's about the gap between humans and God that God decides to close in order to help us.

Again, very interesting.

No story is perfect, of course, but what do you think?

Well, they each help me get a sense of why the Incarnation matters. I like Kierkegaard's emphasis on love, which lines up with the God of original blessing and covenant that we've talked about. And I like the second story because God really can't sit on the sidelines and so gets involved by becoming one of the sparrows.

On the whole, I can definitely see why it took the early Christians a long time to sort all this stuff out. But you said they really fought about it, too, and I'm not sure I understand why. I mean, the Incarnation is a little confusing, sure, but controversial? What was the big deal?

The biggest issue was whether Jesus was God or human or something in between. And it didn't help that the Bible isn't crystal clear on what it says about Jesus. There are passages that seem to support all the different sides in the controversy.

For instance?

For instance, the Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14).

"Became flesh"—incarnation!

Right. John's Gospel is very important when it comes to the Incarnation because John so clearly says that Jesus, the Word, was with God from the beginning and actually was and is God, and also became human.

Okay, so score one for Jesus being God. What about being human? What parts of the Bible support that point of view?

In Luke's Gospel, there are stories about Jesus as a baby and as a twelve-year-old boy before the stories about him as an adult. Luke closes out a story from Jesus' childhood by saying, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years" (Luke 2:52).

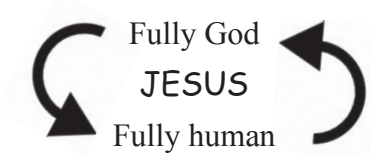
So he grew wiser as he got older, just like we do when we grow up . . . hopefully! That does make him sound pretty human.

So what did the Christian leaders do?

You mean after a couple of centuries of arguments, controversies, councils, and compromises?

Yeah, after that.

They ended up saying he was both, fully human *and* fully God.



Sounds like the perfect compromise—if a little hard to wrap my mind around!

There certainly was a lot of compromising, and it definitely can be challenging to understand. But not everyone thought it was perfect. In fact, there were two huge controversies about the doctrine of the Incarnation that both led up to and followed the original agreements. Each reveals something really important about the way Christians understand Jesus and the larger story of God and the world.

Okay, I'm game: What was controversy number one?

Some Christians argued that saying Jesus was God meant that Christianity was no longer monotheistic.

Hold on. Mono-what?

Sorry. Monotheistic. Again, breaking it down helps. *Mono* means "one" and *theo* means "God," so *monotheistic* literally means "believing in one God."

But what's the problem? Isn't Christianity monotheistic?

Yes, but some wondered how you could have a God in heaven who created the earth and all things, and at the same time a God on the earth—Jesus, walking and talking and eating and all the rest.

Ah, I see. That's a pretty good question when you think about it.

Yes, it was, and it started a huge controversy about whether Jesus really existed from the very beginning with God and as God, as John says, or whether Jesus was created by God—maybe first, before everything else, but still created.

You mean sort of a demi-god, like in Greek mythology or the Percy Jackson books?

Very much like that.

Frankly, this idea of Jesus being a demi-god is a little easier to understand. Given the different biblical passages you mentioned earlier, why didn't folks just go with this view?

A lot of them did. At the height of the controversy, they'd actually hold rallies, like we sometimes do today, and wave their banners and sing their songs.

Wait a minute. They had rally songs?

Sure. The most popular was really more of a chant than a song, but it was essentially, "There was a time when he was not."

Catchy. But what does it mean?

That Jesus isn't eternal. He might be divine, but he was created, and so there was a time before he was created when only God existed. "There was a time when he was not."

I'd love to hear it set to music. But seriously, this doesn't sound that unreasonable. What was the problem?

A lot of people liked it just fine. But Athanasius, a monk and leader of the church in northern Africa, felt that if Jesus is the embodiment of God's promises, then he'd better be eternal.

Why?

Because if he was created, he might also someday be un-created.

Huh?

Well, everything that is created will one day cease to exist—people, plants and animals, the earth, even the universe. So if Jesus wasn't God, but was part of God's creation, then eventually Jesus will cease to exist.

And then what would happen to the promise?

Exactly. If God is going to make you a promise—particularly a promise about raising you from the dead and redeeming the whole cosmos—you want that promise to come from God, not from a demi-god, angel, or superhuman. You want the promise from God so that you know you can trust it. In this sense, Jesus is God's "enfleshed promise."

So how did they deal with the charge that this meant Christianity now had two Gods?

Great question.

Thanks.

And a difficult one, too. The short version of the story is that the early church leaders searched the Scriptures, thought long and hard about it all, and tried out a variety of ways to explain it. They ended up saying that the Christian God revealed in the Bible is one God who simultaneously exists in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Well, that's about as confusing a statement as I've ever heard!

Yeah, it really is. It's called the doctrine of the Trinity, but we're not going to spend a lot of time on it here, because we're focusing on the major plotline of the Bible's story of God and the people of God.

Because the Trinity isn't a part of the story?

It is, but it's not so much a part of the plot in the sense that something actually happens—like the creation, the fall into sin, or the giving of the covenant and the law—as it is the early Christians' reflection on the plotline.

Part of the church tradition. I get it. Still, it'd be nice to understand it a little.

Well, Augustine, whom we talked about earlier, used to describe the Trinity as love. In any loving *relationship*—which is a single thing—there is someone who loves, someone who is being loved, and the love shared between the two—that's three things. Or some other early church leaders used to describe the Trinity as something like sunshine—one thing—that comes from the sun itself, sheds light, and warms us when we feel it on our face—three things. When I was a kid, my mom used to describe it to me.

Wait a sec. Your mom used to talk theology with you when you were a kid?

Well, yeah.

Was she a pastor, too?

No. She was a schoolteacher. I've been saying all along that theology is for everyone.

Yeah, I guess so, but I can't get over that you were talking about this as a kid.

Actually, you'd be surprised how many questions kids have about God.

Maybe. In any case, you were saying about your mom . . .

Yeah, my mom used to describe the Trinity as being like H_2O.

Water?

Water can be either steam, liquid, or ice—one thing that can take shape in three ways.

Very interesting, and helpful, too, actually.

I always thought so, but then I learned that something just like that was declared a heresy in the fourth century, but that's another story.

Your mom was a heretic?

To tell you the truth, good theologians always run the risk of a little heresy, but let's not tell my mom.

Deal.

So does it make a little more sense?

Yes, though the key word definitely is "little."

I get that. To be honest, I don't think anyone completely understands the Trinity, and I wouldn't trust someone if they said they did. That's why you have folks like Augustine offering analogies. They're not perfect, but they help to give you an idea of what's at stake.

And the key thing at stake in the Trinity is that Jesus, the Son, really is God, so that we could trust the—what did you call it—the "enfleshed promise" that God makes in him?

Exactly.

And this is what they fought about?

Fiercely. Even though Athanasius was a bishop over much of what is today Egypt and Libya, he was exiled five different times during his life.

Exiled? You mean he was . . .

Kicked out of his own country. That's right. Which might help explain some of the severe language he uses when defending his position and attacking his opponents.

So, curious minds want to know: What did he say?

His major opponents followed a guy named Arius, one of the major supporters of the "there was a time when he was not" platform. And so he would write against the people he described as "Ariomaniacs."

I like it. I can just see Athanasius riding his donkey out of town for the fifth time, scribbling away, "Cursed by the Ariomaniacs . . . ."

That picture's probably not too far from what happened.

But he eventually won?

Yeah, though not completely until a long time after his death. Eventually, though, the church agreed with Athanasius that God's promises had better come straight from God.

And Christians still believe this all these centuries later.

Well, Christians today, as back then, disagree about plenty of things, including the Incarnation, but most Christians still believe that Jesus was really God, and so we can trust the promises he made to us.

So the Incarnation is first and foremost about God making a promise.

That's right. A promise made in the flesh and blood of Jesus, a promise about new and abundant life, a promise that God is fundamentally on our side, a promise that death doesn't have the last word. And all these promises are promises we can trust because God made them, and God will keep them.

Very cool.

Okay, so what was the second big controversy?

Interestingly, the second argument came from the other side.

The other side?

Well, if Arius had a hard time with the idea that Jesus was really God, a guy named Marcion, and a number of others, had a hard time saying that Jesus was really human.

Really? How come?

Because they had a very clear and very strong sense that God was perfect, that God was immortal, that God was entirely good.

And are they wrong?

No. But they contrasted this very good and very perfect God with fallen, sinful creation, and they couldn't imagine God getting too involved in this messed-up world. And they certainly couldn't fathom God becoming a part of the mess through the Incarnation. They thought it was all a little beneath God.

So what did they make of Jesus?

They thought Jesus was thoroughly divine and only appeared to be human because there was no way the holy God of the universe could become human.

Where did they get that idea?

Actually, the Bible. For instance, we have John describing Jesus as the eternal Word of God. And then in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says just before dying, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). They took that verse as a sign that Jesus' divine spirit had used a human body kind of like a disguise, but had never really become human.

Boy, the Bible really does say a lot of different things. No wonder they were confused.

Absolutely.

So at heart they believed that they were defending the idea of God's perfect goodness?

Exactly.

Again, that makes some sense. So what was at stake this time? Why didn't the early Christians side with Marcion?

To get at this, it might help to share part of a letter that Tertullian, another early church leader, wrote to Marcion.

A letter? Were they friends?

Far from it. Actually, it's written as an address to Marcion and people who agreed with him. But it's actually a paper against Marcion and his ideas. In fact, its title is simply "Against Marcion."

He didn't beat around the bush, did he?

Not at all.

So what did he have to say to Marcion?

First, it's useful to know that Tertullian himself was a very strict monk, an ascetic, actually.

A what?

An "ascetic" is someone who believes that to be really spiritual you need to avoid the worldly pleasures of life. The word comes from a

Greek word for "training," like an athlete in training, and so they try to train their bodies to escape, as much as possible, the physical, carnal life of the body in order to attain spiritual goals.

That sounds a lot like Marcion.

Marcion teaching from his version of Scripture

Quintus Florens Tertullian, 160–220, church father and theologian

Exactly, which is what makes Tertullian's argument with Marcion all the more interesting. You'd think he'd agree that the Incarnation—precisely because it's about God becoming, well, carnal—is a little hard to handle, if not outright scandalous. So here's what he writes:

> *Come, then, start with the birth itself, the object of aversion, and run through your catalogue: the filth of the generative seeds within the womb, of the bodily fluid and blood; the loathsome, curdled lump of flesh which has to be fed for nine months off this same muck. Describe the womb—expanding daily, heavy, troubled, uneasy even in sleep, torn between the impulses of fastidious distaste and those of excessive hunger. . . .*

Not exactly the kind of guy you'd want in the delivery room!

Just wait. It gets even better:

> *Undoubtedly you are also horrified at the infant, the infant which has been brought into the world together with its after birth.*

Sheesh, he spares no details.

What's weird, though, is that as I listen to Tertullian go after Marcion, I actually find myself more and more sympathetic with Marcion. I mean, childbirth is a miracle, but it's also really, really messy. We tend to think about Jesus as a cute little baby in the manger, which is sweet. But when you put it that way—describing the way it actually was—it does seem a little beneath God's dignity to get wrapped up in the messy, mucky world of human biology.

No kidding. I remember thinking the same thing when my son, our first child, was born.

Hold on. Your wife is delivering a baby and you're thinking about the Incarnation?!

Well, I guess I couldn't help it. I mean, I was there helping as much as I could, but I also couldn't help but think about how incredible, really pretty unbelievable, it is that we confess that God was born like this—such a mess, so vulnerable, so totally earthy.

So what did Tertullian have to say about all that?

Actually, it's right here that Tertullian is at his best: "You repudiate such veneration of nature, do you . . . ?" he writes (and at this point I imagine him kind of rearing up to point a long, bony finger at Marcion), "But how were *you* born?"*

Oh my goodness! I get it! If human birth is too messy for God, then so are we. But by becoming human—even by being born as we are—God in Jesus totally promises that God is for us, that God is on our side.

That's exactly right. In the Incarnation God not only assures us that God can understand all of our ups and downs, dreams and disappointments, hopes and fears, but also that God will never give up on us. John Calvin, a Swiss theologian from the sixteenth century, used to describe it as "God's condescension"—God giving up heaven and glory to take on our life.

*From Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem* (chapter IV), which can be found in various free online translations.

It's like God in Jesus grabs hold of us—all of us—and won't let go.

That's the promise the Incarnation makes.

Which means that God is with my dad in his illness, and God understands the anger and pain my friend feels.

That's part of why I think the Incarnation is really important.

I agree. It doesn't answer everything, but it helps me to not feel so alone. Sometimes when my sister talks about God, it just seems like God could heal my dad at any time but isn't healing him because, I don't know, we aren't praying enough, or Dad doesn't have enough faith, or it's all part of some big plan.

(That's when my brother gets really mad, by the way.)

But this is a different picture of God. It's a picture of God being with us, holding on to us. I'd still like to know what God's going to do about it all, but it helps a lot to know that God isn't just sitting up in heaven watching. God is really with us.

I agree. And that's actually what one of the names Jesus has been called means. *Emmanuel* is Hebrew for "God is with us."

As in "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Right. We sing and pray that God would come and really be with us. In Jesus, that is exactly what God did.

So no wonder Tertullian stressed Jesus' humanity. It's the only way we can know God won't ultimately desert us.

Exactly. At the heart of the doctrine of the Incarnation is the promise that God loves us just the way we are.

Say more—this suddenly sounds pretty important.

You're right; it is important. The early Christians believed that part of what is at the heart of the Incarnation is an affirmation of the original blessing that is part of creation. Despite sin, God still believes we're worthy of loving, of holding on to, of redeeming. Why else come to us in our own flesh? And so even if it's confusing to say that God in Jesus is both human and divine, both parts are just too important to give up.

Jesus is divine so that we can trust God's enfleshed promises. That was Athanasius's point. And Jesus is human so that we know God is really coming for us, people who are also of the flesh. That was Tertullian's point.

Right. And while Tertullian had already made the point, it took a little while to sink in how important it was to keep stressing that Jesus really did take on our life, our flesh, our condition. Martin Luther, who lived more than a thousand years after Tertullian, used to say that you can't press Jesus too deeply into the flesh.

What did he mean?

Just that it's so much easier for us to imagine that God is spirit, hovering somewhere out there, in the distance, watching and waiting.

But the God of Scripture doesn't sit on the sidelines.

Right again. This God gets involved.

Okay, so I get how important it is to hold these two things—divine and human—together, even if it's hard. But I also have to say that you're right; it's so much easier to imagine God as spirit than as flesh.

Except that then you can never be really sure that God loves you, just as you are. Not the person you want to become, not the person you promised to become, not the person you're trying to become or pretending to already be, but you, just as you are—in the flesh, fallen, sinful, insecure, regularly missing the mark. That means that there's nothing in you that's so awful as to make you unlovable. That there's nothing that you can do, or that can happen to you, that will keep God from loving you. It's a huge promise.

I think I get it. The Incarnation is God's promise that God loves us. No matter where we go, God will come after us. No matter what happens to us, God will hold on to us. No matter what happens in this life, God will not let us go.

No matter what. The apostle Paul said that nothing—not even life and death—can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:37-39).

I like that. And that's what the Incarnation is finally about?

It's a big part of it. By becoming one of us in Jesus, God is telling us that we are still inherently, intrinsically worthy and deserving of God's love. Sin, whatever problems it has caused our relationships with God and each other, has not changed that.

I think it also means that God understand us, including our hopes and fears, our joys and anger. I was with my friend once when she was really mad—at the guy who hit her with his car, at herself for taking so long to recover, and at God for not doing something to prevent it. Later, I asked if she ever felt guilty about getting so mad. She said she felt guilty when she got mad at people, but not at God. God, she said, would understand.

I think that's right. There's a verse in the Letter to the Hebrews, which is a book in the New Testament, that says, "For we do not have a high priest"—meaning Jesus—"who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

Exactly. I think that's important, too.

You're right. All of these things—that God loves us, that God promises not to abandon us, that God understands what it's like to be us—all of these are part of what the Incarnation is trying to tell us.

So why does God do it? I mean, it sounds really risky. Becoming human, anything could have happened.

And a lot did happen. But I think that just brings us back to the question of why God creates and gives us creation in the first place. It's just in God's nature to create out of love, to share that creation with us out of love, and to take a risk on us, also out of love. And because this is all a part of who God just *is*, then I think God can't help reaching out to us, any more than I could help reaching out to my daughter or son if one of them were in trouble.

That is a powerful promise, and I'm glad we've talked about it all. It's comforting to know that when it comes to the struggles my dad and friend and lots of other people are having, God's not just sitting around impassively or waiting for them to have enough faith. Instead, God is really present with them and for them.

I'm really glad it's been helpful.

Yes, it definitely has. And to be honest, it feels even bigger than just the problems my dad and friend have been having. Because trusting that God cares, really cares and understands, makes it more possible to believe in God at all. I don't think this is necessarily the picture of God that my siblings and I grew up with, and it's definitely not the picture that a lot of the anti-religious books write about. I wonder if even my brother might consider a God like this.

Like we said near the beginning of our conversation, *how* you imagine God to be—whether stern, loving, vengeful, caring, or something else—makes all the difference.

Yeah, it really does, and so this has been very helpful. At the same time, though . . .

Yes?

Well, there are two things that keep nagging at me. First, I guess I'd still like to see God get a little more active. I mean, I appreciate that God is with us in our suffering, but can we expect anything more?

That's a great question. Let's not forget that God also is at work through us, and through the doctors and nurses and others who are caring for your dad, your friend, and others who are sick, just as God is at work through all kinds of people and agencies to help anyone who is suffering.

True, and it's helpful to remember that God continues to care and create through us.

But I still know what you mean. It's one thing to empathize with us; it's another to actually do something, to save us.

That's it exactly!

And in the incarnation of Jesus—and in his life and ministry—God is at work to redeem the world, actively and purposefully, and that's something we will talk about. But before going there, you said you had another question, too.

Well, I've been thinking back to the two stories that you told to help give a picture of what's at stake in the Incarnation. And they're helpful and all, but from what I know of the story of Jesus, it doesn't seem to end quite as nicely as either of those stories. I mean, in the biblical story, Jesus ends up dead. The king who becomes a peasant in Kierkegaard's story and the farmer who becomes a sparrow don't get killed. If these stories were really analogies of the biblical story, then the serving girl would murder her new husband and the sparrows wouldn't just refuse to follow the farmer into the barn—they'd kill him. So what gives?

You're right. The biblical story is a lot darker than either of these short stories. And at this point I think both of the questions you just raised are connected.

How so?

Because when God becomes human, God isn't only making us a promise or telling us God loves us or even showing us the way. God is, in fact, doing all that, but also more. When God becomes human, God is entering into a world of sin with the intention of winning back lost humanity, with the desire to restore a fallen creation. And given how deeply creation—and all of us—are enmeshed in sin, that's going to be quite a struggle. Or, to put it another way, when God becomes human in order to win us back from sin and death, that spells trouble.

Sounds like that's what we should turn to next.

Insights and Questions