

# Love Incarnate

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One minister I look up to surprised me when she said the Christmas season always stressed her out. I did not understand her words at the time, but now, as a minister, I can understand why she could not fully enjoy Christmas. I think most ministers feel this dilemma most keenly during the Christmas season. Ministers are expected to preach hope, peace, joy and love during this special season. It doesn't matter whether they are hopeful, peaceful, joyful and beloved in their own lives; they have no choice but to celebrate Christmas, and to help their congregation celebrate the birth of Christ with a joy that might be more exhausting than uplifting. Please don't worry. I have not been stressed out this Christmastime. Instead, I have enjoyed it, and have learned a lot from you.

Preaching is not an easy job, but it is a privilege to wrestle with the Word of God. What I've learned about preaching is that people appreciate honesty, not lip-service or empty talk. Your wisdom, insights, feedback and responses have been enormously helpful for me. I realize now that I just need to speak from the heart. My grandmother had one piece of advice when I entered Theological school, "Be a human first before being a minister". I took her advice seriously. As time goes by, I appreciate her advice more and more, because I believe that Jesus was more a true human than a minister or a preacher. I think it is an important Advent message that our Christ was born as a baby, just like any other human being.

Last Sunday, our Sunday school children presented the Christmas play, and they amazed us with their enthusiasm, talent and sincerity. After the service, someone told me that she was very moved by their dialogue. Here are some of their lines, near the end of the play.

"I know it's not the real baby Jesus – but it feels like he's really here." "Was he really this tiny?" "He is pretty small." "Just imagine all of God being in this tiny little person." "This was the start." "The start of everything." "Most things start out pretty small."

Aren't they good messages? They help us to see a connection between Christ's life and our lives. Our Christ lived his life as an infant, toddler, youth and adult just like we have lived through the different stages of our lives. He felt everything you have felt: joy, sorrow, compassion, anger, betrayal and hope. He needed what we have needed: food, clothes, love, friends and God's help.

Imagine the baby Jesus being breast-fed by his mother, Mary. Imagine the sounds of the baby crying at night. Imagine the toddler making a step forward, falling, then getting up and trying again and again until he can reach his mother's outstretched arms. Imagine the boy Jesus giving his parents much anxiety as we see in Luke 2. After three days of searching, his mother says to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you." He answers them, "Why did you look for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" He worried his parents, and surprised his parents, just like you did to your parents, and your children did to you.

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is splendid and unique: Mary who became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, Joseph who was under God's direction, the shepherds who were overwhelmed by the good news from the angels, and the wise men who followed that miraculous star. We listen to that extraordinary story every Christmas as if we are outside of the story. But let me remind you that your life and your story are not far away from that story, because I see a connection between God's love and our love through the birth of the baby, Jesus.

I think the baby Jesus is, most of all, a fruit of love. Joseph loved Mary, even after he discovered that his soon-to-be-wife was pregnant. In Deuteronomy 22:23 and 24, "Suppose a man is caught in a town having intercourse with a young woman who is engaged to someone else. You are to take them outside the town and stone them to death." Joseph, who was described as being a righteous man, must have known the law. But he was not rigid; instead he interpreted the law with love, so he planned to dismiss Mary quietly. I think he was caring and thoughtful even before he met an angel in his dream. He was encouraged to take Mary as his wife and he was asked to love Mary more practically: to stay with her in every

circumstance. If he did as he had planned and cast her aside, who knows what would have happened to Mary and the baby?

Mary probably loved Joseph, but unfortunately we can't find their romantic relationship in the Bible. We can only find how Mary loved her son, Jesus. The Bible says in Luke 2:19, after the shepherd visited the baby, "Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them". And throughout Jesus' lifetime, Mary appeared many times, and was there for him even at the cross and after his death. Her love for her son started when she accepted God's unexpected intervention in her life. In Luke 1:38, Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Her willingness to accept things that she did not understand made it possible for her to give birth to God's son; she deserved to be called a representative of God's people.

Matthew and Luke's description of Mary as a virgin did not relate only to her physical state; the purity of her faith was a role model to God's people. The text quoted in Matthew is from Isaiah 7:14 and it says, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." In the Hebrew version of this verse, 'almah' refers to a young woman, either married or unmarried, but when Isaiah was translated into Greek, the Jewish translators chose the word 'parthenos', which means "virgin". Why did they change that word? A helpful clue is provided in the prophets' use of "virgin" with reference to Israel. The Virgin Mary symbolizes all of God's people who were waiting for God's will., and she is an example of how God's will is done through our faith and action.

The baby Jesus is love incarnate and the fruit of love; the baby came into the world with Joseph's gentleness, care and responsibility for his loved ones, and with Mary's courage, acceptance and love for her loved ones. Their story is not so far away from your own love story –each person is different, but love is surprisingly unchangeable. Surely we will celebrate the birth of Christ in our midst, remembering the fruits of our love, and remembering that we are also the fruits of God's love.