

How can this be? That was the question Mary asked when the angel told her that she would conceive a child who would be the Messiah. “How can this be, that I, a virgin, will conceive a son?” This was beyond what a rational person could expect. It defied everything Mary knew about what was possible, yet, that was what God was going to do.

If we step back for a minute, and forget that the Christmas story is so familiar to us, we are forced to ask the question again, “How can this be?” How can the infant that was lying in the manger be both God and man? Think about the words that we sing every year. “Jesus, Lord at thy birth.” Do you mean to tell me that this child, born to two apparently ordinary people, is the Lord? Do you mean to tell me that this baby is God from God, Light from Light eternal?

We are not the first to struggle to fully comprehend this story. Thomas Jefferson could not bring himself to accept miracles, so he decided to edit the Gospels and create his own version of scripture. When Thomas Jefferson created his Bible, he did not include miracles. Jefferson could not come to terms with the idea that God might interfere in the working of the universe, so he took a razor blade and cut and pasted selections from the Gospels into a book he called “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.” In Jefferson’s version, there was no virgin birth. There was no incarnation. There was no resurrection. He created a safe version of the life of Christ, one that we can wrap our minds around. One that fit with what a reasonable person might expect to happen. Jefferson presented a great teacher, a good example, but not God from God, Light from Light eternal.

Of course, cutting out the parts of a book which might challenge our assumptions about what is reasonable cannot change history. The testimony about Jesus from the earliest days of the church tells us that Jesus did things that an ordinary human could not do. The Gospel itself hinges on the fact that God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to Himself. From the very beginning, the first disciples of Jesus said that the infant lying in the manger was the Son of God. He had not yet walked on water and calmed the raging seas. He had not yet given sight to the blind or hearing to the deaf. Yet from the moment of His conception, the child whose birth we remember tonight was both fully God and fully human. The one who depended on the care of Mary and Joseph was God incarnate. How can this be?

There are times when we have to recognize that our minds are finite. We can ask how Jesus can be both full human and fully divine, but even if God explained it, we would not understand. The mystery is beyond our ability to grasp with our own reason, but this should not surprise us. With God, all things are possible. Why should we expect that we can grasp the infinite with finite minds? Why should we be surprised when He does things that we did not expect? When we consider the incarnation and keep in mind that it is the creator of the universe who chose to become incarnate from the virgin Mary, it is easier to believe that He could do it. The one who placed the stars in the sky, and ordered the human genetic code can choose to become incarnate. We might not be able to define every aspect of the incarnation in a way that we can wrap our minds around it, but it is reasonable to believe that He could do it.

There is something deeper, however. It is reasonable to believe that the creator of the universe could become incarnate from the virgin Mary, that the infant in the manger could be fully God and fully man. What goes beyond reason is why He did it. We know the answers that He did it to save us, but why would He want to save us. How can this be?

How can it be that God, who we rejected over and over again chose to be vulnerable? God put us in the garden and gave us all that we could desire, and said, “Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It will kill you.” Instead of believing that His commandment

was for our good, we ignored it, and ate, and died. Later God said, “Don’t worship idols. If you do, you will exchange your glory for something that has eyes, but cannot see, and has ears, but cannot hear.” His own people, whom He had chosen rejected Him, and bowed to a golden calf. God said, “Love one another,” yet we allowed our hearts to be filled in envy, jealousy, anger and murder. In the face of our rejection God decided to send His Son to be incarnate from the virgin Mary. How can this be?

At Christmas, we remember the reason. The Son of God became incarnate from the virgin Mary because He loves us. He had given us that message before. It is written all through the law. God was saying, “I love you. I don’t want you to harm yourselves or each other.” It is written all through the prophets. “I love you. Please return to me, and once again, you will be my people and I will be your God. Please come home.”

The law and the prophets were like letters a lover sends to His beloved. They express the desire to walk together. They express the hope that the beloved will respond in love. When we read those letters, we did not hear the love. We heard demands. We heard judgment. We heard anger. We missed the love.

At Christmas, the message comes again, but this time the message is a person. The incarnation is like the lover coming to his beloved. What we could not hear in the written word, we saw in person in the living word. He made the choice to come to those who had rejected Him in person, and the only begotten Son of the Father became an infant who was wrapped in cloths and placed tenderly in a manger. In spite of all of our rejections, God persisted in His love for us. How can this be?

Perhaps you are here tonight and you are not feeling very lovable. It may be that you know that you have rejected God in various ways. Maybe you have bowed to the American idols of materialism and self-indulgence. Maybe you have not been faithful to promises you have made. Maybe you feel like you have failed those who are closest to you. From the manger in Bethlehem, God speaks to you and says, “I love you. I have not abandoned you. I have come to be with you.”

Perhaps you have grown cold over the years, and the Christmas story no longer surprises you with God’s unfailing love. Think again about the mystery of God’s love made flesh and lying in a manger. His love for you has not grown cold. His heart is still vulnerable to you. His desire is still to be with you. Allow that love to surprise you once again.

Perhaps you still wonder at the love of God who sent His Son for your sake. You still wonder how it could be that He loves you so deeply. Continue in the assurance that is offered in the fact of the incarnation. He loves you. He came to be with you, to give Himself for your sake.

The only question that remains is this. How can it be that anyone would refuse to respond to such love? How could we see the incarnate Son of God choosing to become vulnerable to us, and reject that love? How can it be that we could come to this mystery once again and remain unmoved? How can it be that anyone could leave tonight unchanged by His love?