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Larkspur, California
December 19, 2010

Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
"Fully Human, Fully God"

This is a difficult passage to understand from a modern perspective. I happen to think realistically about birth, life and death. Human beings are born into the world as a result of a relationship between a man and a woman and nowadays also through artificial insemination.

One assumes that Jesus was born in some natural manner. We do not know the details. The details of the story in the gospels are wonderful, beautiful, intriguing, strange, puzzling, mysterious and meaningful. We hear them year after year.

They highlight that the founder of our faith in an amazingly special way was God come to earth to live with us.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection compelled the writers of Matthew, Luke and John to explain his birth in extraordinary terms. In the text today it is by the Holy Spirit and to a virgin mother.

Miraculous births are a common motif in religious texts and historical literature. Stories of miraculous births often include miraculous conceptions and features such as intervention by a deity, supernatural elements, astronomical signs, hardship or in the case of some mythologies complex plots related to creation. All these elements are present in the gospels.

Matthew and Luke highlight the significance of Jesus' birth through story and John through a concept "*Logos*" or "Word": "The Word became flesh and lived among us." Today we will look into the doctrinal dimensions of Matthew's story read today. A close reading reveals that God in Trinitarian fullness is embedded in the story. My sermon focuses on this aspect of this short story.

We read in the story that Jesus is born of the Holy Spirit, his name is Jesus and he is Emmanuel, God with us: God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The full package.

Some people have problems with the Christmas stories and with Trinitarian language. It's important to point out that this is not science, it's not Newtonian physics. It's faith.

Our denomination's latest confession of faith, "A Brief Statement of Faith" speaks of Jesus as "fully human, fully God." How this is so is the subject of many books. *We trust* that is so based on our reading of scripture like the one before us today. The statement reads: "We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God." The word "trust" is important when we speak about Christianity.

This is the Jesus we worship and the Jesus we follow. We shall now look at each item in the order given in the story: Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit,” “and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins,” “and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit,” or as the angel tells Joseph, “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit was transparently present in Jesus at his birth as scripture bears testimony. Angels praised him and shepherds and wise men were drawn into his presence with wonder.

Every child is conceived from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was fully in you and me at our birth. Our births were not accompanied by the amazing stories that surrounded Jesus’ birth but they were special occasions. Bay Area writer Matthew Fox speaks of our birth as a blessing. We were not born in sin as some say. Instead, Fox speaks of original blessing and then original woundedness. We were born blessed and were wounded along the way. Our faith heals us of these wounds.

Our daughter Anna was born during an incredible thunderstorm and I had read in Shakespeare that when a king or very important person was born it was often accompanied by a storm. We attach that importance to Anna. David was born on December 17 and when Suellen was wheeled into the hospital in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, there was a banner across the hallway that read: “For unto us a son is given.” Hours later David came into the world.

Somehow, Jesus was fully Holy Spirit at birth and fully Holy Spirit throughout his life. In our woundedness, we appropriate Jesus into our lives and claim the Holy Spirit in the fullest sense. Jesus said that when he goes we will receive Holy Spirit to continue his ministry in the world.

“And you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The names we give our children are important. Anna is Suellen’s mother’s name and her middle name is Joy my mother’s name. We loved the name David because it is biblical and strong. David’s middle name is Charles which comes from his French heritage (on my mother’s side) and Charles is on both sides of the family. Suellen’s father and brother and my uncle and brother have Charles as first or second names.

The name “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of his name reminded Jews of the Hebrew word for salvation.

According to Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, Douglas Hare, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Matthew has twice identified Jesus as “Messiah” (vv, 1, 18). It was popularly believed that the Messiah would bring salvation to Israel by defeating its gentile foes. Matthew begins his Jesus story by reminding his readers that Jesus brought a very different kind of salvation; a theme that reappears later in the gospel (20:28), “just as the Son of Man (Jesus) came not to be

served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,” and in 26:28, “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Jesus was not a warring person. His manner of saving was service, forgiveness and peaceful negotiation which became the altar on which he was sacrificed by those who brutally opposed his way of salvation. But they did not and do not have the last word. God working in human beings embracing Jesus and his way are still about saving people from dehumanizing – or sinful – behavior.

“And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” I have told this story before. When David, my son, was very young he asked me where God was because he couldn’t see God. I suggested he look at Jesus in the Bible and in seeing Jesus he would see God. Jesus is the best we have in getting a glimpse of God on earth. Other than that God is spiritual. God is presence. God is...

The biblical God is awesome, holy, un-nameable in essence, creator and active in history, and for Reformed Presbyterians, Sovereign love. Any description of God limits God but we as Christians trust that God is there: personal and relational with amazing grace and love. We see God in Jesus and partake of God’s love and power inasmuch as we appropriate Jesus Christ into our lives inspired by the Holy Spirit.

It turns out that the difficult gospel passage before us today is not so difficult. For one, it’s a colorful way of placing before the reader the fullness of God. The “...Brief Statement of Faith” is a Trinitarian statement. It can be found in the front inside jacket of our hymnals.

When you get the chance, read this statement as a reminder of who was born on that special morning 2010 years ago. Amen.