

Confirmation 2020-21
Session 15 – Jesus
January 10, 2021

Background Information

Ever since an angel popped in on a teenage girl named Mary to tell her she was going to have a baby, the question of who Jesus was and is has consumed theologians, philosophers, and inquisitive laypeople. As Christians, we believe that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. In essence, we believe that Jesus was—and is—as completely God as God, and as completely human as us. That is, Jesus experienced the same full range of human emotions and physical realities that we experience today all while being fully divine and completely without sin. It's no surprise that this divine mystery remains difficult to grasp.

Today we will be looking at the person of Jesus. Next week, in our study of the Gospels, we will look at his birth (nativity), life (ministry and example), death (passion), and resurrection as it is told by the four gospel evangelists.

The dual nature of Jesus, at the same time fully human and fully divine, is called the *hypostatic union*, a term you do not need to remember because it is hardly ever used outside of theological circles. This concept was affirmed in the Augsburg Confession, a founding and defining document of Lutheranism, but only after the church rejected many other beliefs about Jesus' identity which were eventually labeled heresies. A heresy is a belief or opinion that is contrary to the orthodox, or correct, doctrine or teachings of the church. Among those theories were:

- *adoptionism*, which claimed that Jesus was just a human to whom God gave special powers,
- *docetism*, which claimed Jesus only looked human but wasn't really human, and
- *eutychianism*, which held that Jesus could only have one nature at a time.

Why would I bring up these ancient heresies now? Because every generation, every person has to struggle with the same issue, who and what is Jesus? Our answers, individually and collectively, define our spiritual and moral lives. And the church trusts that God's will is done, through the work of the Holy Spirit, even when opinions differ and there is no way of knowing. In other words, Christians trust that the Holy Spirit has inspired the church to conclude what it has written about Jesus in its creeds.

Even though we can't easily explain the how of Christ's identity, we believe that this *hypostatic union* is central to what we know about God. It tells us that God wants us to know about God's self. In becoming fully human, God revealed in Jesus Christ experienced the whole of human life and death. Because of that, God revealed in Jesus Christ stands with us in every one of our experiences, not just as a divine presence but as one who knows pain and suffering and joy and love and loss and betrayal and friendship. Finally, the hypostatic union tells us that God chose us in all our human frailty and loves us, not despite our humanity, but because of it.

What you need to know

Jesus is fully human and fully God. Both, at the same time. All the time. This is the *hypostatic union*. And trying to figure out how that can be can be confounding.

Even if we have a hard time explaining how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine, we can still affirm the cause and effect of this mystery. God revealed in Jesus Christ became fully human while remaining fully divine so that we might know God in a way we were unable to before Jesus.

In the proper preface of our liturgy of Holy Communion, we say,

*"In the wonder and mystery of the Word made flesh
you have opened the eyes of faith*

*to a new and radiant vision of your glory,
that beholding the God made visible,
we may be drawn to love the God we cannot see."*

God revealed in Jesus Christ chose us; chose to become like us, to live like us, and to die like us, and as a result, we can say that Jesus is Immanuel (God with us), thus fulfilling the prophecy told about him in Isaiah (7:14).

The understanding of Jesus as fully human and fully divine became the accepted position of the church only after it rejected many other explanations. For some people, it's easier to understand who and what Jesus is by first clarifying who and what he isn't. We might struggle to understand how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine, but most of us can agree that Jesus was not faking his humanity or his divinity. Somehow, he truly was both.

About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

Though Christians believe that the Son of God is foretold of by the prophecies of the Old Testament, the story of God's Son in the person of Jesus is covered in the Gospels of the New Testament. Jesus himself wrote no books or letters, but the entire New Testament is dedicated to telling his story, which is called the Gospel, a Greek word that means *good news*, and repeating his teachings and values. Christians believe that through his Holy Spirit, the story is always being made new. Because we will be looking at the Gospels more specifically next week, I have no real Bible assignment for you this week.

Into the Story

Though we should resist limiting the person of Jesus to the biographical details that we can glean from the Gospels, we will cover his ministry and mission next week in our study of the Gospels.

Timing

As you have probably learned from your history classes in school, the Gregorian calendar we and most of the world use was issued in 1582, and year 0 that was supposed to be the year of Jesus' birth, was based on the best scholarship of that day. Years ago, the time before the birth of Christ was called BC or *before Christ*, and the time after his birth was called Anno Domini, a Latin expression for *the year of our Lord*. However, in the last 500 years, historians have been able to more accurately determine the year of Jesus' birth.

Time was often marked by the ruler of the day. For example, in Luke's nativity, we know that Jesus was born "in the days of King Herod of Judea" (Luke 1:5). Historians pinpoint the death of Herod as March or April of 4 BC, so the birth of Jesus must have occurred before that date. Well, it makes no sense that Christ was born "before Christ" so the term, BCE was developed to make up for the error in the Gregorian calendar. So yes, Christ was born about 4 BCE.

In Matthew chapter 2, Matthew wrote about the visitation of the "wise men" (*maji* or *magi*), an event known as *the Epiphany of our Lord* who "observed his star at its rising" (2:2). Though it is speculation, that star may have been a rare celestial alignment of Jupiter, Venus, and a star known as Regulus all aligning around the same time, around 2 BCE.

Also, the day of Jesus' birthday is relatively arbitrary. People who research this kind of thing have several hypotheses, and *one* of them is that early Christians chose December 25 because that is when it *appeared* to them that the days began to get longer, a day that we call the Winter Solstice, which more accurately occurs on December 21, and they simply were off by four days. And since Jesus is the "great light" spoken of by Isaiah (Isaiah 9:2), and the light breaking into the darkness according to Matthew (Matthew 6:23), and Jesus called himself the "Light of the world" (John 8:12) they thought it was a fitting day to celebrate their Lord's unknown birthday.

Parentage

Mary is the young maiden who has 'found favor with God' identified by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus' conception is by the Holy Spirit of God according to Matthew and Luke, and all four Gospels identify him as the *Son of God*.

Joseph of Nazareth is identified as Mary's husband, although Luke wrote, that Jesus "was the son (as was thought) of Joseph". However, we must remember that God's plan includes the traditional human family and so God saw to it that Jesus had both an earthly mother and father. Little is known about Joseph but tradition tells us that he must have been a good, honorable, and godly man, one well-suited to raise the Son of God in what it means to be human. From the Gospel of Matthew (13:55), we know that Joseph was a carpenter, and from Mark (6:3) we learn that he passed on that trade to his son Jesus.

However, there is more to the story than simply who Jesus' parents were. In those days, lineage was determined through the father. According to prophecy (2 Samuel 7:16; Jeremiah 33:17 among others), God's Messiah had to be from the tribe of Judah and a descendant of David. Luke 2:4 identifies Joseph as "descended from the house and family of David." Though not his biological father, Joseph was used by God to make good on God's promise.

Location

The location of Jesus' birth is only important in as much as it too fulfills prophecy. In Micah 5:2, Bethlehem is identified as the village from which will come "one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." But Joseph was from Nazareth. How can Bethlehem be the place of Jesus' birth? God saw to it that this would happen. In Luke (2:1-7) we learn that God inspired Emperor Augustus to require a census, and that requirement forced Joseph and Mary to travel to "the city of David called Bethlehem because he was descended from the house and family of David."

Youth to Inauguration of Jesus' Public Ministry

Unfortunately, the Gospels are largely silent about the period of Jesus' childhood through about the age thirty. Luke wrote the only story about Jesus between his Nativity and Baptism. In 2:41-51, Luke recorded the story of the boy Jesus being left behind in Jerusalem after the festival of the Passover. When his parents looked for him, they found him "in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." Having found their wayward child, they tried to discipline him explaining the trouble he had caused them, but his response was, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" It is unclear how old Jesus was at that time, but what is clear is that he was beginning to develop his understanding of who he was.

Public Ministry

Luke wrote that Jesus began his public ministry when he was "about thirty years old" (3:23). As mentioned earlier, we will discuss Jesus' public ministry in greater detail next week when we discuss the Gospels. But for now, scholars agree that what we can conclude from scripture is that Jesus' public ministry lasted about three and a half years.

Essay Questions

In your own words, answer three of the following essay questions in 100-150 words each and return them to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, January 17.

1. In our modern culture where we have so much understanding, we might conclude that if a thing cannot be proven, it must not be true. How do you reconcile your faith when so much about Jesus is a mystery and happened long ago?
2. Read Philippians 2:5-8. Do you think it matters that Jesus is fully human and fully divine? What would you change if you were fully human and fully divine?
3. In Philippians 2:5-8, it becomes clear that God chose to become fully human. What does that choice tell us about God?

4. Read Colossians 1:15-20. If Jesus is the image of the invisible God, what can we say about God?
5. I mentioned three heresies of the early church. What is the point? Can't each of us formulate our own opinions about who and what God revealed in Jesus Christ is? What would be the harm in that?