

## WITHOUT PRECEDENT

Krista Tippett hosts the NPR program, “*Speaking of Faith*.” On her August 20, 2009 broadcast, Tippett interviewed Mary Doria Russell, a paleoanthropologist turned novelist who recently converted from Catholicism to Judaism. Speaking of her faith journey, Russell made this comment: “...as I thought more clearly about why I left the [Catholic] Church, I began to realize that for me the Incarnation was the insuperable barrier to faith. That was the point past which I could not get. So I began to realize that if I simply traced the roots of my religion back one generation, I reached the religion that Jesus practiced as opposed to the religion that deified Jesus.”

Those of us who have grown up in the faith rarely consider just how radical the biblical story of the incarnation is. Mary Russell is one of many who stumble over the idea that in Jesus, God took on human flesh. Skepticism rises from all sides: other, non-Christian religions, secularists, and even some who claim to be Christian but deny that Jesus was anything much more than a gentle, religious genius who advanced great insights into morality and spirituality. These all argue that the church borrowed the concepts of virgin birth and incarnation from pagan sources and applied them to Jesus, creating the myth of Jesus, the God-man. Church theologians made up the incarnation. Skeptics allege that Jesus never claimed deity for himself. That, in part, is what Russell means when she describes Christianity as “the religion that *deified* Jesus.”

As we enter the Advent season, we do well to stand back and absorb with fresh eyes and ears the incredible holy miracle that is the incarnation. J. I. Packer expressed it this way: “God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation” (*Knowing God*).

Turn with me to John 1:9-14. John does not tell us anything about the birth of Jesus. He writes a compelling theology about the coming of Jesus. Jesus is:

- the eternal Word who was with God and who was God;
- the One through whom God made all things;
- the One in whom was life—the life that lights our world.

Listen to what he says: “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:9-14).

John describes three responses to the incarnation. The first is found in v. 10: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”

By “the world,” John refers specifically to the world outside of Judaism, the Gentiles—sinful humankind. The world did not even recognize Jesus. To the Roman Empire, Jesus was an obscure peasant from a conquered race; a political nuisance—nothing more.

The world into which Jesus was born worshiped the old pagan gods—the pantheons of Greek and Rome. Contrary to contemporary critics of Christianity, there was nothing in the mythology of the old gods to suggest either a true virgin birth or an incarnation.

For instance, many skeptics point to the story of Zeus and his relationship with Danae as a prototype of a virgin birth. Danaë was—according to the myth—a daughter of King Acrisius of Argos. As the legend goes, King Acrisius went to an oracle to ask if he would have a male heir. The oracle told him that he would be killed by his daughter’s son.

At that time, Danae was childless, so her father locked her up in a bronze tower. But Zeus came to her in the form of golden rain, and impregnated her. Soon after, their child Perseus was born” (Wikipedia).

Danae was one of many sexual conquests by Zeus. According to the mythology, the official consort of Zeus was his sister, Hera, who bore him Ares, the god of war and slaughter, and Hebe, goddess of youth. Zeus also had affairs with the goddesses Themis, Eurynome, Demeter, Mnemosyne, Leto, and Maia and by them fathered many gods. His mortal lovers included, besides Danaë, Leda, Semele, Thetis, Io, and Europa. His sons sired from mortal wives include Hercules, Dardanus, and Amphitryon. He was also the father of Athena, who was said to have sprung from his head.

When Zeus had his fling with Semele, she conceived the baby who would become the god Dionysus. Hera heard about it and in her jealousy appeared to Semele and pretended to befriend her. When Semele confided in Hera that Zeus was the father of her child, Hera planted seeds of doubt about the deity of her lover. So Semele demanded that Zeus reveal himself in all his glory as proof of his godhood.

Zeus tried to refuse but Semele insisted. When Zeus showed up wreathed in bolts of lightening, Semele died. Zeus rescued the fetus, Dionysus, from Semele’s womb, sewed him into his thigh, and a few months later released the full term baby from his thigh on Mt. Pramnos.

In all of these stories, Zeus acts out his lusts. There is nothing holy about his coupling and nothing intentional about his offspring. There is nothing in paganism that even remotely approaches the story of the one true, eternal God who enables a virgin to conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear his Son, Jesus. Jesus didn’t begin his existence with his conception in Mary’s womb. Jesus is God the Son who laid aside his divine glory to take to himself our humanity in order to seek and save lost people. There is nothing in pagan mythology that would have prepared the ancient Greeks and Romans for the incarnation of God the Son in Jesus. They missed it altogether.

Nor were the Jews any better prepared to receive Jesus. The Jews were God’s chosen people. The Son of God came to them and by his life and his miracles offered himself as their promised Messiah. But his own people rejected him. That’s what John meant in v. 11: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

The Jews at the time of Jesus were locked into a nationalistic expectation of Messiah as a warrior/deliverer. He was King David super-sized with God’s anointing. They expected someone who would destroy the hated Roman invaders and restore Israel to international prominence.

They weren’t prepared for Jesus. They couldn’t understand what Jesus meant when he called himself the Son of Man, or worse, the Son of God. That’s why they rejected him. They convicted him of blasphemy before the Jewish supreme court, and then brought him before Pilate accusing him of treason. Jesus came to his own chosen people, and they rejected him.

Everything about the incarnation was unexpected, unprecedented. In the conception and

birth of Jesus we meet Immanuel: God with us—the audacious condescension of God who came to live among us.

That's what John means when he writes: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John makes the startling claim that he and his fellow-disciples had witnessed the glory of God in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the eternal Word, the full expression of Deity. He is the one through whom all things came to be—the Creator. Jesus is the life-giving God-man. His life was this world's light, showing the way to the Father.

And so John refers to a third response to Jesus. The world never recognized him. It still doesn't. His own people rejected him. They still do. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Receiving Jesus—believing in his name—begins with our confident belief that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. He is God come down to make God known. He is God embracing our flesh in order to be God's perfect sacrifice by which the sin of the world might be taken away. Jesus came to restore us to the Father.

The incarnation of God the Son in the person of Jesus is not something added to Christianity. Christianity didn't deify Jesus to make something more of a legendary figure. The incarnation is inherent in the story of God's rescue mission to save us from the terrible consequences of our rebellion and guilt. It is the story of a holy, loving, seeking God who went to incredible lengths, reaching all the way to this side of our humanity in order to reconcile us to himself.

But receiving Jesus goes way beyond affirming his incarnation. It also embraces the cross and the resurrection. The cross is where Jesus took the blame for human guilt—yours and mine. Christ died for our sins to bring us back to God. In the resurrection, Jesus conquered death. God vindicated his son demonstrating that death had no legitimate hold on Jesus. Receiving Jesus—believing in Jesus—means laying the full weight of our confidence upon the certainty that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; that he died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he rose again, according to the Scriptures.

It's really hard to miss Jesus at Christmas, but many do. For many Christmas is about Santa and the North Pole and reindeer and shopping and presents. The manger is just decoration, part of the collection of images that make things feel like Christmas.

If you're here this morning, you probably know more about Jesus than that. But it's still possible for you to miss the significance of Jesus, even though you know the story. That's one response to the Incarnation. Like the rest of the world, Jesus never really shows up on your radar.

Others reject Jesus as he is presented in the Bible. The incarnation is just a myth. Jesus is a nice guy whose story got blown up way out of proportion.

Or, you might believe that Jesus could be the incarnation of God's Son, but he's just another part of the whole God question that you've put on hold. Whoever he is, you've got more important issues on your plate right now. Jesus' birth is nothing more than an excuse for the holiday. If missing Jesus altogether is one option, rejecting Jesus is another.

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."

That's option three. Receive Jesus by truly believing in his name—that means everything

his name stands for. Believe that Jesus is God Son in human flesh who came to be the Savior of the world. Accept him as your rescuer, and the rightful leader of your life.

Receiving Jesus is truly life-changing. Because of what he accomplished by his life, his death and his resurrection, Jesus has the power and authority to make you God's child. And that, my friend, would be the greatest Christmas gift you could ever receive.