

One of us

In my circles, the incarnation is often met with a dismissive liberal skepticism. For me, it has always been a consolation.

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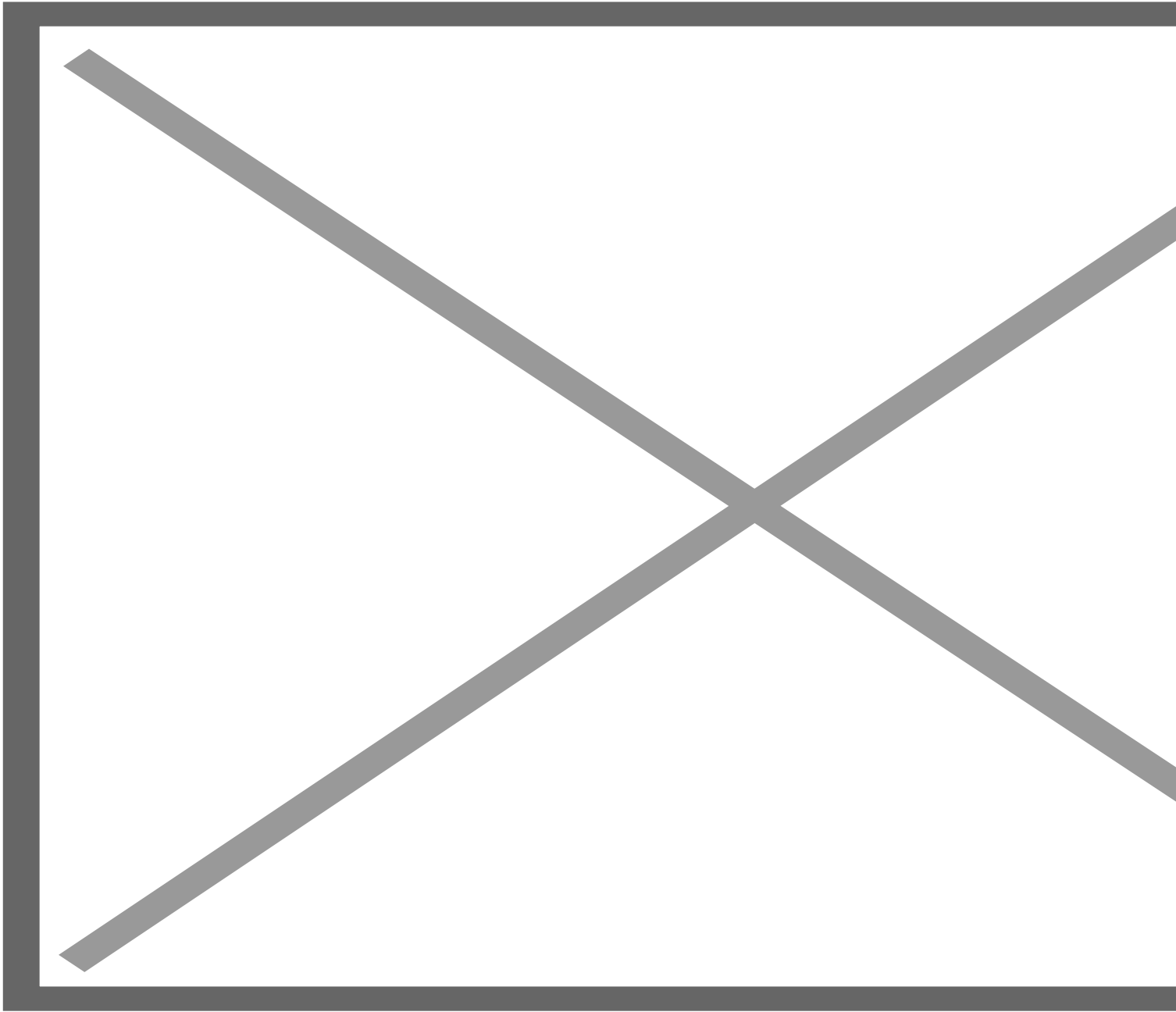


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In the days after Christmas I sink deeply into the mystery of the incarnation. My tug toward the incarnation goes back to Christmas Eve in my home church when I was a teenager. We'd finish singing "Silent Night" at the end of the service. The final reading was from John 1. Then our pastor would stand at the top of the center aisle with the Christ candle aglow in his hands. Holding our own small Christmas candles, we would file by him as we exited. There was no benediction. John's Gospel was the final word.

The light we carried spoke the words for all of us. The words of scripture echoed in my head out into the cold: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Those words have echoed in me ever since. I couldn't explain what I, we, scripture, or the church meant by them. I just experienced those words of John as a deep conviction, a centering truth, a consoling reassurance that whoever God was, God wanted to be with us and for us, as one of us.

It was only later that I gained the theological concepts to surround the conviction that the Word became flesh. I welcomed the theological words and their histories. When I learned to read Greek, I laughed aloud when I realized that John told us that God literally wanted to "tabernacle," or pitch the divine tent in the human wilderness. Growing up on the Nebraska prairie I had little trouble imagining a God of expansive plains, of grand horizons, of thunder and heat lightning seen from miles away. What I read in John's Gospel was that God was also willing to pull up right next to us and pitch a tent on that prairie.

When I encountered the fifth-century pronouncement by the council of Chalcedon that Christ was in two natures, human and divine, without confusion, alteration, division, or separation, it was like pieces of a puzzle clicking elegantly into place. I was helped by Sarah Coakley's reminder that the definition of Chalcedon sets an expansive horizon for how we can think of the incarnation—expansive as the horizons of the Great Plains, I thought.

I have taken these words and pondered them in my heart. For many years I have felt the need to protect them or apologize for them (in the tradition of a Christian defense of faith) in the places where I preach and teach. There the incarnation is often met with a dismissive liberal skepticism.

In my upbringing I was taught to take the ancestors seriously. For me this extends to the ancestors of the church. James Alison helps with this seriousness when he notes that while we can accept "the apostolic witness" or not, often we accept part of it while simultaneously claiming that "from the vantage point of 'modernity' or some such position of supposed superiority, we know better," and that that our sophistication reveals that the apostles are describing subjective experiences. (Alison is speaking of the resurrection; the same could be said of incarnation.) As Alison notes, along with being intellectually incoherent, this position diminishes voices from cultures and time periods other than our own.

Our ancestors are not just describing a subjective experience. The progeny of Platonism, fourth-century Gnosticism, and its second-century precursor Docetism were rejected by the majority of the church for valuing the spiritual over the material—the heavenly over the earthly—and thereby insisting that Christ merely seemed or appeared human. Against this dualism 1 John declares that what "we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched" is God incarnate (1:1).

Ignatius of Antioch, martyred under the emperor Trajan in the early second century, writes to the church at Smyrna, "If these things were accomplished by our Lord only in appearance, I am also in chains only in appearance." No, says Ignatius, he is enduring his trials while Christ, the divine one who became human, empowers him. For John and for Ignatius the one empowering their Christian witness is the Word made flesh, who cast a moral through line from the incarnation to the care and feeding and tending of all flesh.

The God who meets us in the flesh became flesh, the God who meets us in our suffering underwent suffering at our hands, and the God who knows our trauma is resurrected bearing those scars of trauma—and forgiving us for imposing them, abandoning him, betraying him. Theodotus, bishop of Ancyra, preached a Christmas homily in 455 CE, during the ascent of imperial Christianity, reminding us that Jesus became incarnate in a particular kind of flesh. Instead of becoming the son of an emperor or legislator, the Lord

chose nothing but poverty and mean surroundings, everything that was plain and ordinary, and in the eyes of most people, obscure. . . . Christ made no ostentatious display of riches which would have made people frightened to approach him; he assumed no royal state, which would have driven people away from his presence. No, he came among ordinary people as one of themselves, offering himself freely for the salvation of all.

Once again this season, I'm pondering the treasures of the incarnation in my heart. With my spiritual ancestors I'm staking my claim: A God who only seems human, a God too spiritual to become enfleshed in the creation God pronounced good, is not a God I want to believe in.