

**Advent 4, 2019**  
**Romans 1, Matthew 1**

The name Jesus means: The Lord Saves. Jesus saves his people from their sin, both its guilt and its power. Jesus is God with us. We hear some pretty amazing things today about Jesus. With Joseph, we are astonished to learn that the child growing in Mary's womb is not the result of her unfaithfulness to him, but rather of God's faithfulness to the whole world. From Paul we hear that Jesus who died on the cross was revealed the Son of God with power by being raised from the dead. Birth from a virgin, resurrection from the dead: not every day occurrences! Of course, that is the point. We don't expect births from virgins or resurrections from the dead in the ordinary course of events. These are indications of the creative power of God beyond all human and natural possibilities, designating the human life lived Jesus between this birth and death as something extraordinary.

Birth from a virgin at the beginning of Jesus' natural life, resurrection from the dead after its natural end are like bookends setting off the life of Jesus as something holy or sacred. Both works are attributed to the Holy Spirit. Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead. The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of life, brings Jesus into existence in order to create human nature anew in him and the Holy Spirit brings Jesus forth from death in order to redeem human nature from the powers of sin and death and bring us back to God, "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of Jesus' name."

These are great mysteries of our faith. As acts of God alone they admit of no natural explanation, unlike all the other actions in the world which God does in cooperation with nature. These are deeds which God reserves to Himself alone and whose glory God shares with no other, for birth from a virgin and resurrection from the dead are the almighty deeds of the Creator, not the creature, to be received with praise and thanksgiving. They tell us what it means to believe in God, who has possibilities beyond what we know or even imagine. If we believe in God at all we believe that with human beings some things are impossible, but with God all things are possible. Of course, not all things are fitting. Not all things are wise. Not all things are just. But with God all things are possible and in Jesus Christ God wisely and justly finds the way to reach us and grasp us and hold us fast and bring us to himself, saving us from our sins.

Many folks today mock these mysteries as fairy tales. They have done so from the beginning. They do not grasp what we are dealing here, not with magic tricks or occult powers which human beings can dream up or manipulate, but with God seeking us and finding us and winning us to himself. Thus we cannot ask scientifically how these mysteries are possible or impossible. There is no scientific explanation because if they are what Christian faith believes them to be, they are not natural events at all, even though they take place in nature. They are divine events, these mysteries of our faith, in which God imparts and reveals Himself as the almighty Father, Creator of heaven and earth, all things visible and invisible, who spins the galaxies on His fingertips, who called the world into being out of nothing, yet who forgives our sins and gives life to the dead, takes on human flesh and lives a human life, gives his Spirit also to me and you.

We cannot understand how God does such things. If we could, we would be God. If we understood how God creates we could in principle do the same, and there would be then no difference between God and us. That can never be. There is a barrier here that can never be crossed. Never in all eternity will we understand how. God is God and we are not. Not even science can bridge this gap.

Nevertheless it is our great joy and dignity that we do come to understand *why* God does what he does. It is our glory as human beings to understand why God does what he does, how these mysterious acts of divine power are fitting, just, good and wise. God is all powerful to give gifts that seek from us one thing only: praise, thanksgiving, new hearts full of adoration. For in Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin to die on the cross in our place, yet risen from the dead and revealed God's own Son, God over and above all temporal gifts has given us His very own self. Why the birth from a virgin? Why Jesus? Why death on a cross and then resurrection from the dead? God wants to re-create our human nature from the needy, greedy selfishness in which it born to the generous, self-giving love God shows us in Jesus. Even though showing this kind of love in our needy, greedy world brought Jesus to the cross. Even there Jesus gave himself in our place, the innocent for the guilty, so that all our guilt piled on him was buried with him and left forever in the oblivion of the tomb when God raised him from death. That is why God does things in this way, so that by the Holy Spirit we too may be born anew, may rise from the dead to live new lives to God.

Joseph is our model here today. He assumed the natural things when he discovered Mary to be pregnant, yet being a just man who did not wish to disgrace her publicly, he decided to divorce her quietly. When the truth is revealed to him, he does not

object and ask how this can be. The angel of the Lord offered no explanation of how it could be, though he says much about why God is doing this: The name Jesus means: The Lord Saves. Jesus saves his people from their sin, both its guilt and its power. Jesus is God with us. Satisfied to know why, respectful of the power of God beyond human imagination, Joseph swallowed his male pride, and surrendered himself to God's will and purpose, taking Mary for his wife and naming the child Jesus.

Our modern science with its amazing insight into nature is a wonderful achievement of the human mind, just as the power it gives us over nature is a great blessing – *if* we know why we are given this power and for what purpose it is to be used. The same power that cures cancer also makes weapons of mass destruction. Science cannot save us from this – save us from our sins. To acknowledge this limit of science is one small step short of acknowledging that God is God and we are not, that God has possibilities beyond our imagination, that God declares God to us in such mysteries as birth from a virgin and resurrection from the dead in order to do what science never can: save us from our sins so that we use our powers for the good of the creation and to the glory of God.

In humble faith we draw near to the mystery of the Word made flesh: “O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright? I lay in fetters groaning, you came to set me free; I stood my shame bemoaning, you came to honor me... Love caused your incarnation; love brought you down to me. Your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty. O love beyond all telling that led you to embrace in love, all loves excelling, our lost and fallen race.” (Paul Gerhardt).