

“Crazy Making”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

Crosspoint and South Lake Presbyterian Churches
Combined Christmas Day Service + December 25, 2011
John 1:1-14 + the Incarnation

David Wasserman had an expression he liked to use: “crazy-making.” Dave, now retired Exec of Grace Presbytery, when he made a call on a pastor or elder, invariably asked:

“What is crazy-making in your life right now?”

I like that expression. I like the sincere pastoral concern it expresses. That has spurred me to a lot of thought about what is the most crazy-making aspect of ministry, and I can honestly say the most crazy-making aspect of my ministry right now, in fact of all Christian ministry and belief is trying to make sense of John 1:14:

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”

So easily said, it slips right off the tongue, we skip right over it – repeated so often we hardly think about it – but the claim itself is outrageous: the claim God became human!! That God “emptied” of self took the form of a servant – a human servant!! God born of a human mother, God enfleshed in every way as we are – outrageous, blasphemous even.

In the formal sense, we have a name for this idea. We call it ‘the incarnation.’ It is a foundational concept for all Christians, and yet giving it a name does not make it any less unapproachable nor any less unknowable. Dave Wasserman’s word “crazy making” is certainly appropriate here.

You may not think the idea of the divine becoming human, the infinite taking on finitude, is so controversial – not “crazy-making” at all, but that simply stems from neglect. This idea is profoundly upsetting – or should be. Consider what happened when I was a chaplain on the psychiatric block of Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia.

Make a mental note of that, conjure up all the images: the *psychiatric block*, a unit for the criminally insane in one of the most overcrowded prisons in America. What images does that conjure up for you?

We had a thriving and positive little Bible study going with a number of prisoners diligently studying scripture together. It was going along fine until December when the text, foolishly following the lectionary, turned to the genealogy of Jesus from Matthew. Not even on topic, but this raised questions in some about the *virgin birth* and suddenly all kinds of craziness broke out.

One prisoner (who was admittedly insane by the standards of a court) began to get much too interested in the miraculous biology of the birth of Jesus – the mechanics of how that enfleshment worked. While formerly the group had handled difficult concept well, this idea of God becoming human surprisingly was too much for most of the folks there – way too much cognitive dissonance to maintain emotional balance. Individuals began to act out, guards had to intervene and the whole process melted down. The Bible study never recovered.

Years later at a congregation in Dallas, a mentally ill adult member had to be disciplined after he verbally assaulted a Sunday School teacher over an entirely innocent comment about the virgin birth made before the class was even started.

What is it about the *virgin birth* that is so outrageous that it causes the mentally unbalanced to go berserk but the mentally balanced among us don't even give it a second thought? Are we so insensitive to the audacity of the claim that we no longer find the idea an assault on our intelligence? Is our idea of God so small that the idea of the infinite being reduced to a finite life no longer astounds us? Are we incapable of wonder?

What is it about God becoming human that should make the faith of the balanced crazy and does make the unbalanced crazier?

Is it the cognitive dissonance involved in imagining the divine mixing with the profane? Is it God's breaking down of the infinite distance between heaven and earth? Is it the sheer in-your-face

aggression of the claim that Jesus was simultaneously fully human and fully divine?

“Martin Marty once analyzed the word ‘incarnation.’ When ‘carn’ shows up in the dictionary, it usually signals the wild, messy, ungodly things. Carnage: the slaughter of flesh. Carnal: the lust of flesh.

The Incarnation tells us God is involved with ‘carn,’ with the wild and messy but not ungodly things that go with our flesh, our bodily natures.

The term ‘The Incarnation’ was designed to rule out two notions that haunted believers. First it rules out the idea that God being God cannot take on the wild and messy conditions of the human race.

The other idea the term ‘The Incarnation’ protects is dear to believers: this “very God of very God” – incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary, “the word made flesh” – is one of us.

When we suffer, we know that God identifies with us, has suffered in our ‘carn,’ our flesh. When we are tempted, we take strength from knowing that so was the “true God from true God” incarnate in Jesus. When we die, among the tears are God’s tears. When good things happen to us, we rejoice knowing that God rejoices with us.”

Henry Nouwen once said:

“When we are the most human, we are the most divine.”

What he means by that is that because of Jesus, we are never more divine than when we are the most human. That is the true mystery of the incarnation. That is perhaps the most outrageous claim of all! Crazy-making.

The Apostle Paul puts it in these terms:

“God was in [Jesus] reconciling the world to [God’s] self.” [II Corinthians 5:19]

How audacious to think that God, the infinite, eternal and unchangeable, the high ruler of the entire universe would stoop so low as to become one of us. It staggers the mind. That God would leave the realm of perfection and unchangeable light to enter the cesspool which is human existence. That God, when we are estranged from God, would stoop so low as to rebuild the bridge for our return – a bridge which we ourselves have destroyed.

In pre-marital counseling I often ask of a couple: “When did love begin?” Most couples answer: “It’s hard to say,” which is a perfectly good answer. But with God, do we know when love begins? We do – indeed. Right there in Genesis, Chapter I, Verse I. “In the beginning...” Right here in John Chapter I, Verse I, the author takes us back to Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word...” With God, everything begins and ends in love.

“Love child” has such a negative connotation, but rightly applied Jesus was God’s love child – as are we!! We are all God’s love children – from the beginning – born in love, carried in love, dying – in love! All God’s children from beginning to end.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” [John 1:1, 14]

What is crazy-making in your life right now? Undoubtedly the idea of the incarnation is not high on the list for any of us. Yet the wonder of God being born in Jesus is precisely that it means God is intimately involved in every aspect of our lives – most especially the crazy-making parts. God is concerned, deeply involved and each moment intervening in all the crazy-making aspects of our everyday lives. Nothing is outside God’s concern demonstrated in Jesus’ birth.

Crazy-making, yes, but crazy like a fox – merely crazy appearing like all God’s profound truths when distilled down to human, limited perspective. God not only dwelt among us, but God shares our suffering, our pain, our grief and our ecstatic joy as well. God shares with us our human antagonism towards death and even more God

shares the actual experience of dying in Jesus. God the infinite ruler of all that is, was and will be – God shares it all.

Now that is audacious.

Now that is outrageous – but true – God's truth.