

*Luke 1:26–38 (NIV)*

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

*John 1:14-18 (NIV)*

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup>(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup>Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. <sup>17</sup>For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

*Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV)*

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

*All things were created in, through, and for Jesus.*

*And yet, he was born and he died. Why does this matter to us?*

Last week and this, we are looking at questions we ask and mistakes we make when it comes to very nature of Jesus – who was he? Really . . . in actual fact . . . who was this man from the village of Nazareth who ended up on a Roman cross and whom his supporters believed was resurrected by God to newly-embodied life? Who was he? Who is he?

Anyone who has heard of Jesus has had to confront these questions. Jesus can be dismissed but is not easily ignored. For 2,000 years Christians have strived to embrace more fully the Jesus-Who-Is and it is often quite a challenge.

As we saw last week, Christians find that in the New Testament there are statements that seem outright contradictory. Jesus was born to a young woman from Nazareth but was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was killed by a Roman execution squad but also was "the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And on and on.

Indeed, Christians proclaimed to all who would listen two truths: Jesus was fully and completely God and Jesus was fully and completely human. It took a few centuries for the Christians to be able to fully articulate their beliefs about Jesus, but from the earliest days

we see in the writings of the New Testament and elsewhere that the believers worshipped Jesus as Lord and God, this Galilean tradesman in first-century Palestine.

Holding two such claims about a single person can be a challenge and some have long sought to resolve this *fully God/fully human* statement into something that makes sense to them. We want to understand, not merely affirm.

The Docetics led the way in this attempt by denying Jesus' genuine humanity. We looked at Docetism last week and saw the destructive consequences of this particular heresy.

This week, we flip the coin and take a look at a controversy that arose nearly 300 years after Jesus – the claim that Jesus wasn't really truly God, a claim popularized by a bishop from Alexandria named Arius.

### *Bishop Arius*

In a couple of months, most children and all retailers will be totally into Santa Claus. The origins of Santa are varied, but many trace Santa back to an actual person – St. Nicholas, a fourth century Christian bishop from Myra in modern-day Turkey who had a reputation for secretive gift-giving. At a large conference called by the emperor Constantine in AD 325 to confront the doctrinal challenge posed by Bishop Arius, it was reported that St. Nick struck Arius right in the face at one point in the proceeding. Yes, one and the same Nicholas. Whether true or not, the story illustrates the amount of heat generated by the *Arian* controversy in the fourth century. John Julius Norwich fills in some of the backstory:

It was Pope Sylvester's ["Pope"/the Bishop of Rome from 315 to 335] misfortune to witness, during his papacy, the appearance of the first of the great heresies that were to split the Church in the centuries to come. This was first propagated by a certain Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, a man of immense learning and splendid physical presence. His message was simple enough: that Jesus Christ was not coeternal and of one substance with God the Father but had been created by Him at a specific time and for a specific purpose, as his instrument for the salvation of the world. Thus, although a perfect man, the Son must always be subordinate to the Father. Here, in the eyes of Arius's archbishop, Alexander, was a dangerous doctrine indeed, and he took immediate measures to stamp it out.

In 320 [Arius] was arraigned before nearly a hundred bishops from Egypt, Libya, and Tripolitania and excommunicated as a heretic. The damage, however, was done: the teaching spread like wildfire. Those were the days, it must be remembered, when theological arguments were of passionate interest, not just to churchmen and scholars but to the whole Greek-speaking world. Broadsheets were distributed; rabble-rousing speeches were made in the marketplace; slogans were chalked on walls. Everyone had an opinion: you were either for Arius or against him. He himself, unlike most theologians, was a brilliant publicist; the better to disseminate his views, he actually wrote several popular songs and jingles— for sailors, travelers, carpenters, and other trades— which were sung and whistled in the streets. Then, a year or two later, Arius— who had hurriedly left Alexandria after his excommunication— returned in triumph. He had appeared before two further synods in Asia Minor, both of which had declared overwhelmingly his favor, and now he demanded his old job back.<sup>1</sup>

To sum it up, Arius claimed that “there was a time when Jesus was not.” In other words, there was a time when Jesus did not exist, making him a creature just like the rest of us and not the eternal Word – for there was never a time when God did not exist.

Constantine's conference, the famed Council of Nicaea, was the first of the great universal Ecumenical Councils called by the burgeoning and now officially-sanctioned Christian churches. More than 300 bishops came to Nicaea in AD 325 to consider the Arian controversy. After much work and debate they drafted and, all but a couple, signed a creed that is still recited in churches worldwide and is printed in our UMC hymnals: The Nicene Creed. In part this is what they wrote about the Jesus:

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<sup>1</sup> Norwich, John Julius (2011-07-12). *Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy* (Kindle Locations 372-381). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup>From the UMC hymnal. “Begotten” isn't a word we use much more anymore. Human children are

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.”<sup>2</sup>

The Creed could not be clearer. No one could possibly misread the claim in the Nicene Creed that, yes, Jesus is God.

*“All the fullness of God”*

In the New Testament, we find passage after passage that helps us to understand the near unanimity of the bishops. For example, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul composed a hymn of sorts to Jesus, lifting up his unity with the Father. Here is how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Colossians 1:15-17 in *The Message* (the whole Christ-hymn is one of today’s Scripture passages):

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

Take a second and read the full Colossians Christ-hymn printed on page one of this study.

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the LORD God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousand years to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God’s desire for us.

Notice also that Paul speaks of all things and all powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing . . . that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one human in whom God’s fullness<sup>3</sup> dwells. What a beautiful phrase Paul uses to describe the mystery of the incarnation (the claim that God Almighty chose to be born in human flesh to that young woman from Nazareth).

And what is God’s purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the “blood of his cross.” This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus’ death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is so.

*Why does this matter?*

Our proclamation of Jesus’ full and genuine divinity matters because it is the incarnation – God taking on human flesh – that reveals to us who God really is and his relentless pursuit of us and all humanity out of nothing more than love.

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<sup>2</sup>From the UMC hymnal. “Begotten” isn’t a word we use much more anymore. Human children are begotten of human parents. Puppies are begotten of canine parents. We beget our own kind. Thus, to call Jesus God’s only begotten Son is to make clear that he uniquely shares God’s DNA, to use an analogy.

<sup>3</sup>Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” From *The Message*: “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. Sometimes, I think we've about convinced ourselves that we have the inherent right to do whatever we want. But Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God's beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn't cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness.” (see another Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus' surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul's point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, anymore than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.” God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because “God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. If we want to know what love is like, we can look to the cross.

That's why God, in the person of Jesus Christ, chose to be the one faithful Jew who would keep God's covenant on behalf of all Jews and, hence, all humanity. God did for his people what they were unable to do for themselves and, in that extreme act of humble, sacrificial, and incarnational love, God saved the whole world.

Thus, those bishops from long ago wisely and overwhelmingly voted down Arius. It is why they wrote the stirring creed of Nicaea. It is why we must be bold and confident when we proclaim to the world the birth of the Christ-child – for in this lies the deepest and most important mystery of all.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. John's first claim about Jesus is clear, bewildering but clear: Jesus, the Word, is God. But what if John is wrong and Jesus isn't really God? Why do you think the early church fought so hard to protect the claim of Jesus' genuine divinity? What happens to the Good News if Jesus isn't really and truly and fully God?
2. The difficulty of the passage from Colossians is that, like so much of Paul, every sentence, every phrase, is packed with meaning and power. Yet, we sometimes shy away from such passages. If we do more than let our minds dance across the surface of the words, it can all seem so “heavy.” Do you ever feel intimidated by such passages? Do you find yourself reading quickly past much of it? What can we do to help ourselves to be ready for, to even desire, “solid food”?
3. Do you see how even in these few verses (1:15-20) from Colossians, Paul blasts away any notion that we could think of Jesus as a mere man? Why do you think this is so important to Paul? We have to be careful to give up our claim that Jesus was fully human while we proclaim his divinity, though this is not Paul's emphasis here (see Philippians 2: 5-11 for that). In *The Da Vinci Code* Robert Langdon says at the end of the movie, “What really matters is what you believe.” What do you think Paul would say to that? Why?
4. In story of Jesus' birth, one can't help being struck by the ordinary sorts of people chosen by God to play most extraordinary roles in human history. Are we prepared for the extraordinary work God wants to do in our lives? Are we prepared to hear God when he asks us to undertake something extraordinary, or seemingly impossible, in the furtherance of his kingdom?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Matthew 8:23-27</b> Even creation is obedient to Jesus.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, John 4:7-14</b> Jesus introduces a woman at a well to the Living Water.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Mark 14:53-65</b> What do you think Jesus claims about himself when he replies to the high priest in v. 62?</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 10:31-42</b> The crowds certainly seem to understand that Jesus is claiming a unity with God.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Mark 2:1-12</b> Who can forgive sins? God can . . . and Jesus.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

