

In September 1897, the *New York Sun* received a letter:

Dear Editor. I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in the Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon

The letter was assigned to Francis Church, a man who just years prior had served the *NY Sun* as a correspondent covering the Civil War. His experience there affected him deeply, and he was known to be an atheist and a hardened cynic. But his reply came to be the most famous editorial column in American history. Here's part:

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

In other words, "Virginia, we have to believe in Santa Claus because it would be unbearable to face the world without him. We have no reason to believe he's there, but he is associated with such wonderful things—generosity, devotion, beauty, love, joy." He ends the editorial:

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Mr. Church is right about one thing: life would be unbearable without love, joy, and hope. But is that why we are "believers"—simply because we're too scared, too weak, too childish to face of the alternative? Is Christmas a season of hope and joy simply because we all double down on our denial that the world is broken and life is hard, sometimes unbearably so?

That's the issue we want to address in our Advent series this year. We're going back to the basics of our Christian faith to see if there really

is strong reason for hope and joy at Christmas. ***The basics of Christianity is Christ Himself.*** Everything rises and falls with Jesus. If we get clear in our minds exactly who He is, everything else becomes plain. This is Christianity 101. But it's not just for beginners. It's for all of us. Because what we'll find is that Jesus' identity IS the rock-solid foundation for everything else good that Christmas offers.

The foundational theme for today: Jesus is the son of Mary:

vv15-16 ...and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. **vv18-21, 24-25** Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Jesus was a human being.

There are some sensational elements to this story which we'll address in a moment. But first, notice what's plain: Jesus was a human being. He had an extensive family lineage Matthew makes a point to trace out in 17 verses. He was conceived in a human mother's womb. He experienced a normal human birth. His parents named Him "Jesus," and that's what everybody called Him.

Legends have grown up around Jesus' childhood and adolescence—special powers, amazing wonders. He never lost a footprint or cried when His mom laid Him down. These are worse than speculation; they're unbiblical superstition. The Scriptures expressly tell us Jesus was ordinary in every way: "*he had no form or majesty that we should look*

at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2). Nothing set Him apart that way from His peers. Luke tells us a single story about Jesus at age 12 that indicates He was mature, wise, and spiritually sensitive beyond His years; but that’s no more than we should expect, knowing what else we do about His identity.

What the Bible emphatically denies is that Jesus’ nature was any different from our own. He experienced all the normal limitations of mortality: hunger, weariness, thirst. He knew joy & sorrow & everything between.

Furthermore, His limitations weren’t restricted to the bodily, physical constraints of humanness. He also knew the limits of a normal human mind. **Just like you, Jesus did not know everything!** He asked sincere questions, genuinely seeking information. Jesus even avowed that he did NOT know the date of His own return. This shouldn’t surprise us—after all, **how else could his experience have been a real incarnation?** Some imagine Jesus going through life knowing all the secrets of the universe, reading the thoughts of everyone around Him, perceiving ahead of time the outcome of every conversation. If this was His experience, then it was not a normal human life! Yes, at times he possessed information surpassing the ordinary—the past of the woman at the well, the fact that Lazarus was dead. But this information was always directly connected to His mission in that moment—much like Peter knew the heart of Annanias when he lied about giving all the money. Understand: ignorance is not error. It is not the same as being mistaken, and it’s certainly not a sin.

In addition—and this is perhaps the most important point to me—Jesus knew and viewed Himself as a man: “Man shall not live by bread alone” (Mt 4:4).

Hebrews 2:16-17 *For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

The point I’m protecting here is the full incarnation of Jesus—that his becoming a man involved an incredible level of condescension, to the point where He lived a life just like ours, sin excepted.

He even experienced temptation and suffering to the full extent, and **he went through it as a man**. In the Garden, He was “in agony” and “sweat great drops of blood” (Lk 22:44). Jesus was shrinking back in horror from the experience of the cross—a natural reaction any man would have had. When he prayed “Thy will be done,” it was a real victory won the hard way. The struggle was real. **Jesus was sinless, not because He was God and thus impervious to temptation, but because as a faithful, God-fearing man, He committed Himself to the Father moment by moment His entire life long.** His victory was real!

Jesus was not ONLY a human being.

Matthew makes clear there certainly were supernatural elements about Jesus that set Him apart from the ordinary:

vv18-23 *...she [Mary] was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).*

Next week we’ll talk about Jesus name “Immanuel,” and what it means that He is God. Now I want to draw your attention to the other conspicuous element in the story: that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived.

That, obviously, is impossible. And that, of course, is the point. Jesus’ birth was a miracle. God was doing something unique here. The Virgin Birth (better, “virginal conception”) of Jesus has become something of a litmus test within Christian circles—a way of identifying whether someone really accepts the Bible. Those who deny the virgin birth

usually deny the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture.

I hope that's not you. But maybe you think the VB is irrelevant at best and an embarrassment at worst. The problem wouldn't matter as much if the VB were restricted to one obscure passage—we might just be able to plead ignorance and claim the Bible doesn't make a big deal over it. But actually, it very clear, very emphatic, and appears several times (Is 7:14, Mt 1:18-25, Lk 1:26-38; cf. also Mt 1:16, Lk 3:23, Mk 6:3, Jn 8:41). All of which strongly suggests that God has something important for us in this unusual and puzzling Christian teaching.

Here's what we know for sure: God did this as a "sign" (Is 7). This is the most important and the only certain purpose we have for the VB—it was a sign that this was a decisive act of God. It was a confirmation that God is drawing near, His grace is at work here, you can trust what you are seeing. That's how signs function in the Bible—a confirmation that this really is happening. ***God's promises are often greater than man's power to receive, so God willingly gives signs.***

The Virgin Birth is a sign that God is with us. He has sent a Redeemer. He has not abandoned His broken world. The Virgin Birth means your Christmas celebration doesn't have to happen in Mayberry to include real joy. Real Christmas joy is not a thin, gauzy shield of denial that the world is a dark place. ***It's a strong hope that God has not left us alone in the darkness. He has acted in time, in this world, not to add to the grief but to be with us in it and ultimately to fix it.***

The Virgin Birth is a sign that God is at work—this we know for sure. But I think we can go one step further and say it is also a sign/symbol of HOW God works. It carries within itself the sum and substance of the Gospel.

- It is something new redeeming something old from within. Through Mary, Jesus is connected by flesh and blood with the human race. He truly was conceived in and born from a human mother's womb. He did not restart the human race out of nothing. And yet, he truly is a New Man.
- It is 100% the work of God. The VB was initiated by God's grace, performed by God's power, and marked with God's perfect

holiness. In other words, Jesus was born from above, just like all other members of His new humanity must be. The man Jesus was brought to life by a sovereign act of the Spirit of God, just as all those of the New Humanity who come after Him. One becomes a Christian in the same way the Word became flesh.

Why This Matters

1. The humanity of Jesus validates our existence as human beings.

It shows the heart of God toward our race. We appear insignificant to ourselves in the scope of the whole universe, but the incarnation shows we are not insignificant to God. God is up to something in human history—in your life. He is at work in this world.

H. W. Longfellow, writing during the Civil War:

And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men."

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, goodwill to men."

The simply humanity of Jesus tells us this. God is not dead. And he's not asleep. He has come down to us, entering our world, taking our flesh.

2. The humanity of Jesus gives us a Mediator who understands our weakness and our struggles.

Hebrews 4:15-16 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

The story of Christmas is, of course, that God Himself entered our world. He became familiar with our experience. He knows our situation, not just because His infinite mind encompasses all the data. He knows

because He came.

Feel abandoned? So was Jesus. Physically worn out? He was, too. Sad and discouraged? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Overwhelmed by the ravaging effects of sin? He became sin for us. Grieved at the death of a loved one? He wept by Lazarus' tomb.

3. The humanity of Jesus makes possible our salvation.

Sin was a debt owed by mankind to God, so it needed to be paid by a man. If He wasn't a true human being, He could not have paid for the sins of humanity:

Hebrews 10:4-5, 10, 14 *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;" ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

Christmas hope isn't wishful thinking. It's not ignoring the facts or taking a leap of faith into the dark. It's a settled confidence of the truth.

Friends, all your feelings of joy and peace will be short-lived unless they are based in something real—solid hope that your world really will turn out the way the story promises. This baby in the manger—and that Man on the cross—proves it will.