

"Birthed from Before the Beginning"

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First in an Advent series, "The God Who Shows Up"

Hebrews 1:1-5 and Luke 2:41-52

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Please read the Bible passages. You can find them [here](#).

The Eternal Pre-Teen

Once I had my own children. I became less patient with this pre-teen who wandered off, leaving his parents frantic for three days. Even though he'd gone to church or, in this case, the Temple. Even he is Jesus, and he's . . . well . . . eternal.

Leading up to his birth, we were told that he "*will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, God's Son, the Messiah, the Lord, the Saviour.*"¹

Yes, *this* kid.

Listen to what people will soon start calling him: the image of the invisible God, and the firstborn of all creation!²

Yes, this Bethlehem boy was birthed long before his mother was. Figure that out!

About him they will say that before anything was, he was, and that through him everything was created.

Yes, this kid with dirt under his fingernails made the dirt.

You heard our reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews. This Jesus is God's Son, God's heir. Through this Jesus, God has created. This Jesus is the light of God's glory, the imprint of God's being.

Yes, this kid with acne.

Jesus himself will say, "*I and the Father are one.*"³

When Mary and Joseph find him, what does he say?

"Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?"

Their house is back in Nazareth. It's like Jesus is saying, "*I can't have been lost, because I've come here, my family home.*" He is talking about the most sacred place on earth, the

¹ See Luke 1:32, 35 and 2:11.

² For what follows, see Colossians 1:15-17.

³ John 10:30.

Lord's Temple, the centre of God's presence in creation. He's talking about God in a family way!

This simple story of every parent's nightmare becomes a way into realizing who Jesus is.

Nicaea

Jump ahead about 300 years. The Church's senior leaders gather in a city called Nicaea (in what's now Turkey). The Jesus movement has just become an established religion. His people who'd been running for their lives from state-sponsored terror are now honoured guests of the emperor.⁴

They have something to sort out; what is Jesus' relationship to God.

Many are saying that Jesus was extremely important, the most important person ever, the highest among all creatures God has made. But, Jesus was still made, created by God. So Jesus is not God.⁵

Other disagree, vehemently, including Saint Nicholas of Myra. Yes, the original St. Nick. Later legend has him at the meeting, duking it out with an opponent. (That would get him on his own naughty list? Not nice!)⁶

Whoever won the brawl, Nicholas and his colleagues won the debate. The council realized from the Scriptures these things about Jesus. It's part of what we call *The Nicene Creed*.

*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.*

⁴ The emperor Constantine himself has summoned them. He was claiming to be one of them. He wanted to use Christianity to unite the empire under him (sorry, "under Jesus" he says.) That unification would be a lot easier if the Christians themselves would get it together. They are squabbling about things the emperor doesn't really care about. Such as who Jesus is. Yes, I'm cynical about the emperor Constantine's genuineness, both as a Christian and as someone who should have had any role in the affairs of the church. For a helpful account of the council, see Mark A. Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), chapter 2.

⁵ This view is called Arianism, after its most well-known proponent, Arius of Alexandria. See Alister McGrath, Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 140ff. Modern Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints embrace similar views to Arianism, though with differences.

⁶ This episode almost certainly did not happen, but it's a great story!

We about to start singing Christmas carols. Behind them, and sometimes explicit in them, is this understanding, this realization, this celebration of who Jesus is.

Meanwhile in Spain

Today we're going to hear a beautiful piece, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*. It's really old. It was a Latin poem, written by Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. As his name sounds, he was highly educated. He served as a judge and a big-city mayor. When he was 57, he gave it all up, lived a life of poverty, meditated and wrote poetry. He lived in the century after that meeting in Nicaea. He was far away, in northern Spain. Still, the council's proclamation of Jesus had spread all over.

Marcus' poem has 9 verses. Let's hear 3, translated into English, as sung by the Centre Wellington Singers last year.

*Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
he the Source, the Ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!*

*O that birth forever blessed,
when the Virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race;
and the babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore!*

*O ye heights of heav'n, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing;
all dominions, bow before him
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
ev'ry voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore!*

Begotten

Notice that word. It echos the Creed which says Jesus is "*eternally begotten of the Father,*" and "*begotten, not made.*"

Begotten is a birthing word.⁷ It's about producing a child.

Begetting is different than creating. C. S. Lewis explained this very well. (I've changed his words a bit.)

When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds.

But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a woman makes . . . say, a statue. If she is a clever enough carver she may make a statue which is very like her indeed. But, of course, it is not a real person; it only looks like one. . . .

What God begets is God; just as what a person begets is a person. What God creates is not God, just as what a person creates is not a person.⁸

Those folks at Nicaea used this idea of begetting to get at the relationship between Jesus and God. God the Father begot God the Son. Together with the Holy Spirit, they are the one God: a unity with diversity, a community that's singular.

As the carol says, Jesus' "begotten-ness" is evermore and evermore, always and beyond always. God the Son had no beginning. There never was a time when Jesus was not. A modern theologian puts it this way: "*Christ was with God before there was a 'was.'*"⁹ He was birthed before Bethlehem. He was God-birthed before the beginning.

God with Skin On

We don't explain this. How can we comprehend God? We receive it. We realize it, from Scripture and from pondering what Jesus has shown us. We express it, as the Creed does. And we celebrate it. Especially at Christmas.

Because of what it means!

⁷ "Beget" comes from Old English, and is specifically used for a man fathering a child. However, the Nicene Creed was written in Greek, and the word used, *gennaó*, is used for both for a man fathering a child and a woman giving birth to a child. See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/beget> and <https://biblehub.com/greek/1080.htm>.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London, UK: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 134f. I adapted it to make the wording less male-dominated, and changed "wireless set" to "computer."

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, "Begotten, Not Made: The Grammar of Christmas," a sermon he preached in 2011. www.abc.net.au/religion/begotten-not-made-the-grammar-of-christmas/10100920

It means we can know what God is like. Yes, as I said, we cannot comprehend God. Yet, God has not left us in the dark. The writer of that message to the Hebrews said, *"The Son is the light of God's glory and the imprint of God's being."*

A friend of mine, John Borthwick, put it this way: *Jesus is what the Divine does when the Divine puts on skin and walks among us.*

When we see Jesus doing something, we know that's what God does.

Jesus feeds crowds with an abundance, because God gives enough food for everyone.

Jesus breaks people away from demonic powers, because God is steadfastly against all that's evil.

Jesus stands against injustice, because God's shatters the rod of oppression.

Jesus heals people, because God makes us whole.

Jesus takes hold of outcasts, because God restores community.

Jesus crosses boundaries of gender, race and religion, because God tears down dividing walls.

Jesus forgives freely, because God's restores us sinners.

Jesus turns water into wine, because God loves a celebration.

Jesus loves perfectly, because God is perfect love.

Birthed to Save

*God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father. . . .*

This means Jesus has successfully saved us from Sin.

Only God can break Sin's power over us and within us. Only God can forgive us for everything. Only God's self-offering can accomplish what none of us, nor all of us together, can do. Only God's life can free us from Death's terror. Jesus, God the Son, has done this.

So relax.

Don't try to save yourself. Do you suppose you need to add anything to what God has done?

Don't imagine you're a hopeless case. Do you suppose what God has already done is anything less than enough?

Don't despair for the world. Even these days! Jesus has proved God's love for the world. He has proved God's commitment to the world. He has guaranteed the world's future. What better guarantee can there be that his, he who is

*God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.*

Evermore and evermore! Praise be to God!