

Incarnation

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[0 : 00] Okay, I am Mira Solani Joyner. My pronouns are she, her, hers. Thank you so much, Pastor Anthony and Pastor Tanetta, for inviting me to be with you all this morning and to worship alongside you.

What can I tell you? I can say that I was Heidi's classmate up until I graduated from Wesley Seminary with an MDiv this past May. Yeah, that's pretty great. It was a dream of mine. I'm an immigrant. I've lived in the United States for 10 years.

I'm originally from Hong Kong. That's where I was born. It's not my ethnicity. My ethnicity is that my dad is Indian and my mother is Filipino. What else can I tell you? I have three beautiful children. I won't tell you their names because this is live.

But I do have a fur baby. I'll tell you his name. His name is Milo and he's pretty dope. All right. I think that's a decent introduction, right? Yeah? Okay. I mean, you'll hear a little bit more about me and you can always, we can link up online or we can talk in the hallway later.

But let's get into the word. This morning, I am going to be preaching from John 1, verses 1 through 14. So if you have your devices, you can follow along with me. I'll be preaching from the NRSB.

[1 : 25] In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light, the true light, which enlightens everyone, and was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him. Yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

[2 : 28] But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God.

And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

This is the word of the Lord. I can always tell who the mainliners are after I say that, but you don't have to say that. Anyway, today I'm going to be talking about the doctrine of incarnation, which is a belief that God entered the world in human form as Jesus, and through the person of Jesus and life of Jesus, renewed and redeemed humanity, reconciling the world to God's self.

And now I could give you a systematics class and tell you about the history of how this doctrine came about and the various implications and all the arguments that theologians have and what it means for the debate and what this debate meant for the birth of Christianity.

I could do that, but I would bore you. So what I'm going to do today, and I don't have time for that. I only have about 25 minutes or until they kick me off the stage.

[3 : 58] What I'm going to do instead is I'm going to share how this doctrine impacted my faith since conversion and what it means for me today as a Christian as my faith has evolved.

But before I begin, I wondered if you can say a simple one-word prayer with me. The prayer is the Sanskrit word namaste.

Now if you practice yoga, you might be familiar with this word. It is a word with Vedic roots. It's a word that my Hindu father taught me, but its meaning has evolved over time to being just a greeting to one another.

And I wanted to begin this time praying this simple one-word prayer because what it means is so beautiful. And I think it's really relevant for our conversation today about incarnation.

The word namaste literally means the divine in me sees the divine in you. The image of God in me sees the image of God in you.

[5 : 10] And this single-word prayer, when said out loud, it's a reminder that in each one of us, we house the Holy Spirit, regardless of who we are.

That the presence of God is within us and in one another. So I'd like us to, if you feel comfortable, to bow your heads. And we're going to say this with an in and out breath.

We're going to take a deep breath in. And after our out breath, we will pray the single word namaste. Now I understand that there may be some baggage around this word because it's tied to a Vedic tradition.

So if you're uncomfortable with this word, that's okay. I invite you to take a deep breath in and just pray the sentiment. The divine in me sees the divine in you.

All right? Let's do it. Breathing in. Namaste. Thank you for indulging me.

[6 : 13] This belief that the divine could reside in each one of us as human beings is made possible by the person and the life of Jesus.

And it is explained by the doctrine of incarnation. And this is a radical idea. It's radical because prior to the birth of Jesus, the Near Eastern religions, the religions of that time, around the area where Jesus was born, they believed that the God or the gods, because many were believed in many gods, that they resided far from the people.

So they resided up in the heavens, away from humanity. But in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it's written in Genesis that God is distinct, that our God is distinct because God created out of themselves.

And there's something very intimate about that creation because life itself is not possible without God, not just creating things, but animating things.

And it is that intimacy that God has with creation because the source of life itself comes from God. God said, let there be light. And there was light.

[7 : 28] God said, and it became. God said, and made everything. And the author of John in the passage we just read said, everything came to being through the word.

And without the word, nothing came into being. What came into being through the word was life. And now the word life, sorry, the word word, literally means divine expression.

Say with me, divine expression. Divine expression. I want you to remember that. Out of a formless, empty void, God created an entire ecosystem that was harmonious with one another, all living things.

And the only reason it was is because of God's divine expression that made it possible for each living being to contribute to life.

I think I recognize you all. You're the whites, right? It's Mira. Hi, I'm sorry. It's nice to see you all. I'll get back to my sermon. I'll have to come say hi to you all later.

[8 : 38] I used to babysit. I don't know if you remember me. Anyway, I'm sorry. I know them from LA. This is how bizarre this is.

Okay. So now there's this harmony, right? In all of creation. But then chaos entered the world. And it's understood that this separation happened between humanity and God at the moment where, most of us have read in Genesis, the moment where Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And since then, humanity has drifted further apart from God, the source of all life. And this is how people understood decay and death, how decay and death was introduced to life.

And over time, death and decay has become synonymous with sin and corruption. Now I'm being very intentional when I say the word understood to be.

Because the way scripture is being written is how people understood, is how people understood their relationship with God. So they understood that if something is interrupting life flourishing, that must mean something.

[9 : 55] That must mean something that has to do something with our relationship with God. So something interrupted our relationship with God. Now in the Christian tradition, this separation, this fracture in our relationship with God has been made right in the person of Jesus.

God, the creator of the universe, entered into this life, taking on the vessel, the body of a human.

And that time, this human body was seen as corrupt because of its separation from God since the beginning of time. But for our creator, our creator took up that body, took up the most divine being in all of the universe, took up that body and became the human being that we know as Jesus the Christ.

And now we know that the birth, that Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection, through all of that, we can witness that we don't have to live our lives separate from God anymore.

That we have another option in which to live our lives. Now for me, when I converted as a 12-year-old to an evangelical expression of the Christian faith, I was taught that this option was salvation.

[11 : 16] And now salvation means many different things. But in an evangelical expression of the Christian faith, what salvation meant was that I could be saved from a state of sin.

That instead of my life going down a path of corruption, I could be saved and then would be granted a ticket to heaven. I was taught that as a non-Christian, I needed to pray the sinner's prayer and declare Jesus as my Lord and Savior and then I would be saved.

So instead of my life going down a corruption, my soul being continually corrupted, heading down towards the pit of hell and eventual suffering there, that I could experience communion with God.

And that would make me, as it says in verse 12, that would make me a child of God. Now following Jesus and being included as a child of God would mean that my destination wouldn't be death.

That my destination instead would be eternal life. this was the good news that I was taught. Was this the good news any of you were taught?

[12 : 27] Does this sound familiar? You don't have to put your hands up but I do see some heads nodding. And now this is the good news. I'm not denying that at all. This is the good news. It is good news that death has been overcome.

That eternal life is there. It is good news to many. But it is only one way to look at the Christian faith. And the problem is that many expressions of the Christian faith solely focus on this one thing.

This ticket to heaven kind of faith. And doing so erases the significance of Jesus' birth. Jesus' lineage. Jesus' ministry.

And all the stories that have been retold by the gospel writers. There are four gospels for a reason. And they're all all these four gospels. We tell the stories of Jesus' life in four different ways.

If his life wasn't necessary if it didn't shape the good news we'd only have one version. But we have four. Now instead of limiting the good news to this ticket to heaven faith I believe that there is a more beautiful gospel.

[13 : 41] There is a more beautiful gospel that it's shaped and defined by Jesus' ancestors. By the person that God chose to be born to.

A teenage girl who was on the run from authorities. That the good news is shaped by his interactions with people. His ministry and even his arguments and debates with political leaders.

I believe that even in his suffering even his time in the garden of Gethsemane that there is a good news there that we can see.

And there is no doubt that in his death and resurrection there is a good news. But all of this all of this illuminates and shines light on the fullness and the beauty of the gospel message.

But that was not the version of Christianity that I converted to. The limited version of Christianity that I prescribed to I had a lot of issues with it.

[14 : 49] There were two major issues that bothered me with this ticket to heaven version of faith. One is that I knew I was saved but everyone I loved everyone in my family they were non-believers and they weren't considered saved so then they couldn't enter into heaven.

They weren't considered children of God because my father was Hindu and my mother Catholic. Catholic an expression of Christianity that many Christian many other expressions of the Christian faith don't believe is acceptable.

The other issue I had with this ticket of heaven faith was that I was told that I could lose my salvation at any time that it could be taken from me.

If I didn't check in with God on a daily basis and ask for forgiveness for my sins that I could lose my salvation. Now this wasn't something that I made up in my head.

This was something that was told to me by a pastor when I went to seek pastoral counseling from him. This happened when I went to him during a pastoral counseling session I went to seek pastoral care because a few days before that event I had been out with some friends.

[16 : 10] I had been out having a good time with them. We had a few drinks but I became a victim of sexual assault. And so I went to go a few days later after being filled with all the shame and confusion I went to seek the one person I thought that would help me feel better.

And instead of grieving with me instead of reminding me of my sense of worth restoring in me my identity as God's beloved this pastor said that I was at risk of losing my salvation because of my lifestyle and because of whom I was choosing to fraternize with.

and from that day forward I came to believe that I deserved what happened to me because I made sinful choices and as I went through college and in my professional life I believed that as a woman that all I was was a body that could cause men to stumble and this was further affirmed by how society views Asian women that we were submissive that we were quiet we don't argue that we are objects of someone's fetish so when I was the recipient of unwelcome sexual advances time and time again after that incident occurred I would think this is my fault I must have done something to deserve this or I could have done something to prevent this why didn't I do that thing now this view of women particularly women of color whom society has hyper sexualized and objectified more than their white counterparts this view completely distorts the divine image that is held within us it becomes so distorted that our worth becomes unrecognizable by society and even by ourselves and because of this we become vulnerable to exploitation over our bodies for labor and for pleasure so I would ask myself how is it that being a woman could be a disqualifier how could someone else's fetish be the reason that God would disown me and this view of

God picking and choosing who is acceptable to be included as a child of God and who isn't that is a really big problem because it actually goes against what scripture says about our beginnings now when Genesis says God created us from God's self one of the first things that God says is it is good about all things that they created and Richard Rohr I know that Heidi referenced Richard Rohr anyone familiar with Richard Rohr he wrote in the universal Christ he proposed that the creation was actually the first incarnation and he proposes this because for Richard Rohr the first for creation because it manifested God's self in physical form God's self poured out into the universe into the world all of whom

God is entered the world and because of that Richard Rohr suggests that this in fact is the first incarnation and just as God said it is good then God has continued to create and as God continues to create God continues to say it is good it is good to see this thing I created that is everything that I poured out into they continue to delight in each living thing that is a divine expression of their love and creativity they say wow this mirror look at this mirror that we created right here she's a good one we did real good here God says Melody you are so good God says Heidi you Heidi oh this one is very very good

[20 : 50] God says when God was knitting Lola in Bukola's womb God said did this with such delight and even wrote in Psalm 139 that God did so with such delight that Lola was fearfully and wonderfully made but I think what's happened is that over time I think that as we grow and as we interact with one another as we have navigated the world our own perception of our goodness has become distorted not only that but it's been difficult to see the goodness in another person now verse 10 and 11 of the passage we just read says that Jesus God in human form wasn't accepted by us and in some versions it says that Jesus wasn't recognized by us and I believe that this was because this was because we couldn't recognize

God the goodness that was in Jesus because we stopped recognizing this in one another because the image of God in one another became clouded by hate prejudice and judgment over the course of history so to remember what God's presence looked like God in Jesus had to enter the world in the most radical way and I believe that God intentionally chose to be birthed by an unwed teenage girl to place a mirror to our own prejudices about women so that we can confront an image like this and see that we have held prejudices about unwed women poor women and women of color and that we viewed them as less than I believe this action was supposed to say to us you might have objectified women but for me the divine creator

I chose her I'm choosing to in some ways submit to her to trust her to rely on her for my nourishment I'm choosing this life right here instead of a life growing up in a palace I'm choosing this life to show my face to the world I believe that God intentionally chose to be born as a refugee who had to rely on strangers for his survival to show humanity that people that we have placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy because of their class their race because of their culture because of their status of whether or not they're U.S.

citizens that Jesus wanted us to confront the people that we have held to prejudice because of that to show these are not depraved people but they are hospitable and kind they took care of strangers and this could not be a more beautiful expression next slide please this could not be a more beautiful example of love in action the full picture didn't fit in but this is a nativity scene from Asia and I chose this specifically because colonizers came to the Asian continent to several Asian countries convincing us that their way of being was better than ours but I wanted to show this picture of the nativity because we know how to take care of each other and that's an example of divine expression that is love in action

I believe that God made God's self human to show us that being human is not a thing to be ashamed of the body in which God occupied the experience everything there is to be human and opposed letting shame reside in that body that body had homies had besties fought with authority figures hung out with rebels and outcasts and that body traveled across cultural boundaries and partied just like I did that body did so in the Middle East and that entire time God remained both fully human and fully divine in the person of Jesus now over the course of my faith journey

[26 : 05] I'm learning now to see the ways in which the image of God has been diminished in myself and in humanity in my queer siblings in my black siblings in my fellow Asian siblings in my Latinx siblings and my indigenous siblings I'm learning to see that the light that Jesus brings and see that this light has shed truth and the truth is none of us are beyond redemption and have ever been beyond redemption I'm learning that true to being the light of the world the person of Jesus in his life and in his ministry in his interactions with other people Jesus didn't sell tickets to heaven but what Jesus did was remind the most marginalized the most disenfranchised he reminded them of their personhood he affirmed he reaffirmed their identity as children of God that had been discolored by the powers and principalities that deemed them as unworthy and this can be seen we see these stories we see this in Jesus' interaction with the

Samaritan woman as he reminds her this woman who is someone whom Jesus is own people have deemed unclean and her own people also saw her as unclean Jesus reminds her of her worth and says in you there is wisdom in you contains the spring for everlasting life Cole Arthur Riley author of This Here Flesh anyone read that book amazing book she says we need other people to see our own face to bear witness to their beauty and truth and I think this is why we needed John to bear witness to Jesus' coming but we also need one another I needed to see my dad to bear witness to his beauty and the truth that he held within him my Hindu dad who passed me a simple one word prayer full of so much truth and wisdom but the society the Christian world ostracizes someone like him the doctrine of incarnation is important because the truth is that we are a product of

God's expression of love and that truth has been buried beneath lies and hate and it needed to be illuminated by Jesus in his birth life death and resurrection through that we now need to see Jesus illuminated the image of God we need to see that in every single person next slide I love how this looks in every single picture there you see the divine image and this divine image I'm sorry most of them are male I'm realizing that now but the point is the face of Jesus is reflected in each one of us as people who call ourselves Christian and I'm assuming everyone in this space calls themselves a Christian we choose to follow Christ but we do so not simply to secure a ticket to heaven it's not simply to be a part of this exclusive membership to God's family and because that's the that's part that's so much of what Jesus was challenging religious authorities we choose to follow

Christ when we do that it's actually what we're doing is we're making a commitment to participate in this action of outpouring of love into the world so by choosing to follow Christ we are agreeing to participate with the divine in creation we are choosing to co-labor with the divine for justice we are choosing to actively participate in God's expression of mercy in this world we are choosing to demonstrate to one another what God's expansive grace looks like that I believe is what it means to be empowered as children of God now sitting here right now I don't know what you're carrying but you might be thinking you might be going through something you might be seeing that the world is so evil that you might be experiencing something in your personal life that seems so far from God maybe this experience feels like that there's no way of seeing change there's no hope that it's beyond redeeming it may seem like the only salvation from the evil that you're experiencing whether it's in the world and or let's be real in your personal life you might be someone who feels as though the only thing only room for hope is an escape from that evil into a paradise that's at the end of this life and it is it is but I think that part of our

Christian faith is to see that although there are powers and principalities of evil that are present in this world in the systems and structures that are of racism of heteronormativity of ableism classism and all the isms God's presence is and has always been here and can never be extinguished come on let me get an amen let that sink in God's presence is and is has always been here and will never be extinguished our faith calls on us to recognize that to see that as God's children we were created to contribute to this life we must remember that we are image bearers and see others as image bearers too so that we can participate in this fullness of this divine expression that is life that sustains life so no our faith isn't just a ticket to heaven it's a partnership with God so that we don't have to wait until after this life to experience the presence of God but it's recognizing that it is here the presence of God is here it's in me it's in you and at the same time it has yet to be fully expressed but we can be part of that full expression of divinity here on earth as it is in heaven namaste heavenly heavenly god heavenly creator god who who created us who created us good so good very good each one of us in this space however we identify god you are so pleased with what you see so i ask you god to remind us of that remind us to behave in ways that believe that truth about ourselves that we are god's children remind us to see that in another remind us to be vessels to animate your goodness in this world to reach for your fullest expression here on earth as it is in heaven in your heavenly and holy name we pray amen