

“John’s Teaching about Jesus”

John 1:29-34

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent 2021; December 12, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the Gospel reading today, John the Baptist is on the scene. He came preaching to prepare people to meet the coming Christ through repentance and his testimony about Jesus. He also came to testify to Christ as the light and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He said other important things about Jesus that are vitally important.

The things John said about Jesus come into focus in light of an interesting article in Christianity Today, entitled: “Most Americans, and Many Christians, Don’t Believe the Son of God Existed Before the Manger.” What this means is that most Americans and many Christians don’t believe that the Son of God existed as God the Son prior to Jesus’s conception in the womb of His mother, Mary, and His birth at Bethlehem.

The article was written by an Aaron Earls of Lifeway Research (Aaron Earls, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/december/christmas-jesus-birth-son-god-existence-lifeway-survey.html>). The purpose of the article was to report some findings by Lifeway Research regarding what Americans and American Christians believe about Jesus.

The Lifeway researchers asked people three questions about Jesus. These were whether (1) “Jesus is the Son of God,;” (2) whether “Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem; and (3) whether “the Son of God existed before Jesus was born.” The question about whether Jesus was born 2,000 years ago is merely a historical question, meaning, whether there was a historical person by the name of Jesus who was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago as a matter of the historical record.

The third question is the real important question. This is whether the Son of God existed before Jesus’s conception and birth. This question gets to the gist of John’s testimony about Jesus, as well as the entire apostolic testimony about Him. This question is essential because it has to do with whether Jesus is believed to be true God, as well as true Man.

As such, it also has to do with whether Jesus really did obtain for us the forgiveness of our sins before God. If Jesus did not exist as the Son of God prior to His conception as Jesus, then He could not be true God. In that event, He was just a creature; and on modern terms, just a mere human being. But if He was just a mere human being, He could not atone for our sins. If it was not God the Son in human flesh appearing who died on that Roman cross on Good Friday and rose again on the third day, then our sin has not been atoned for before God.

The Lifeway research generated their findings in terms of three groups of people. These were American adults in general, active Christians, and unaffiliated people. Active Christians were defined as those who attend church at least 4 times a month. I am not sure what they mean by “unaffiliated” people. Unaffiliated usually means not being associated with “organized religion,” that is, not being associated with a church and local congregation that have a definite set of beliefs about God, Jesus, and the way of salvation. But it is not clear from the article if these people claim to be Christians while also claiming not to be associated with “organized religion.”

So question 1: Whether Jesus is the Son of God. Among American adults, 80% said they believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Among active Christians 98% said they believe it. Among the unaffiliated, 48% believe it. Before getting too excited about these results, we need to wait

for the responses to the third question, about whether the Son of God existed before Jesus was born.

The second question: Whether Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. 72% of American adults believe that. Among active Christians 95% believe it. Among the unaffiliated 33% believe it.

The third question: Whether the Son of God existed before Jesus was born. Among American adults only 41% believe it. Among active Christians 63% believe it. Among the unaffiliated only 15% believe it.

Remember that I suggested that we not get too excited about the results regarding whether people believe that Jesus is the Son of God. This is because though 80% of American adults believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and 95% of active Christians, only 41% of American adults believe that the Son of God existed prior to Jesus's conception and only 63% of active Christians believe it. And among the unaffiliated, only 15% percent believe in the Son of God's prior existence.

That 15% strikes me as a pretty dismal number. It also seems to completely undermine the argument so prevalent today that a person can in general become and remain a Christian while being disconnected from "organized religion," though there are undoubtedly exceptions here and there.

Is 63% of active Christians believing that the Son of God existed prior to the incarnation a satisfying or disappointing number? I suppose we could argue that different ways. We can see from that result, however, particularly in comparison to the unaffiliated, that going to church matters a great deal. This research confirms how important it is to participate in the gathering of Christ's people identified by the confession of Christ; gathered to hear the word of God read, preached, and taught; confessing the Creeds, participating in the church's liturgy and song that affirms the deity of Christ over and over again; participating at Christ's table where He presides as our God to do by the power of His Word and Spirit what a merely human Christ could not do.

So much for the Lifeway research. We come to the testimony of John. He saw Jesus coming toward him one day and proclaimed: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Then he went on to say this about Jesus: "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me'" (John 1:30 ESV). The NASB says it well: "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (John 1:30 NASB). So the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is also the one who ranks higher than John and existed before John.

So John proclaims that Jesus existed before John existed. We understand this when we compare it to the history. In terms of history, John existed before Jesus, because John was conceived and born at least 6 months before Jesus. So if Jesus existed before John, then John is not talking about history here but being. John is testifying that Jesus existed in being before John, even though John was born before Jesus in history. John also testifies that Jesus is the Son of God. So John testifies that Jesus existed as the divine Son of God before history, before Jesus's conception and birth. John confirms this in his way by telling us that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. A mere human being cannot do that.

The testimony of the Apostles confirm this. The Apostle John testifies like this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:1-2, 14 ESV). The Word as the Son of

God existed prior to the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary.

The Apostle Paul testifies like this: “[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5 ESV). How could God send forth his Son at the right time, if the Son had not existed as the Son before the conception of Jesus? He couldn’t. And here Paul makes a direct connection of the Son of God existing prior to conception and His work of redeeming human beings from the condemnation of the law on account of sin.

But then there is the testimony of Jesus Himself. We hear what He said in His high priestly prayer the night before His crucifixion: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5 ESV). Here Jesus testifies that He shared the glory of the Father before the world was created. So He existed as God the Son before His conception and birth at Bethlehem. What profound praise, therefore, that the Son should become flesh and dwell among us and go to that Roman cross.

And so based on the testimony of Scripture, given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we confess in the words of the Nicene Creed that the Son of God was “begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made” (Nicene Creed, Lutheran Service Book, p. 206). Since the Son of God existed as God the Son before all worlds were created, we along with the whole church of all time confess that He existed as God the Son prior to the conception and birth of Jesus.

But once again, this is essential to our salvation. It is not just fancy metaphysical speculation. If God the Son did not exist before the conception of Jesus, then Jesus was only a human being. If that is the case, then you have no basis to claim forgiveness of sins, except your own works. But it is quite a shaky foundation for a sinner to claim to have satisfied God’s perfect holiness and justice by the sinner’s own sin-corrupted attempts at self-justification. So if the Son of God did not exist as God the Son prior to the conception of Jesus, then there is no justification by grace through faith. The loss of the prior existence of the Son of God means the loss of redemption and the promise of justification. The affirmation of the prior existence of the Son of God as taught and proclaimed in the apostolic Gospel embraces redemption and leads to our justification by grace before God.

For testimony as to what we believe, teach, and confess about Jesus as Lutherans, I could cite the testimony of the Lutheran confessions. Let us, though, hear the confession of Martin Luther in the words of his song, Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice:

“God said to His beloved Son: ‘It’s time to have compassion; Then go, bright Jewel of My crown, And bring to all salvation; From sin and sorrow set them free; Slay bitter death for them that they; May live with You forever.’

The Son obeyed His Father’s will; Was born of virgin mother; And God’s good pleasure to fulfill; He came to be my brother; His royal pow’r disguised He bore; A servant’s form like mine He wore; To lead the devil captive”

(Martin Luther, Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice, trans. Richard Massie, Lutheran Service Book, #556).

On this Gaudete Sunday, we can say: “gaudete, gaudete, christus est natus ex maria virgine, gaudete:” which is: rejoice, rejoice, Christ is born of the Virgin Mary, rejoice. Salvation unto us has come in Jesus, God the Son in human flesh appearing and redeeming. Amen.