

DECEMBER 2009

PPL wishes
 you a
 Blessed
 Christmas!

Holy Spirit encounter in the womb

Two babies meet while still in the womb of their mothers and the Holy Spirit bears witness between them. God comes into the womb of a woman and so identifies with humankind in our weakest, and most vulnerable condition.

Luke is the only author of the four gospels to include the account of Elizabeth's pregnancy. A medical doctor, he provides background and detail. Matthew introduces John the Baptist with the words, "in those days John the Baptist came preaching." Mark simply starts with "John appeared, baptizing...and proclaiming." And, John states, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." But, Luke, sets out to present an "orderly account" and so he begins John's bio by introducing the readers to John's parents. Luke details Zechariah's encounter with an angel. The angel informs Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth, though "advanced in years" will bear him a son who will be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."

The angel's words are fulfilled and Elizabeth conceives and hides herself for the first five months of pregnancy. In Elizabeth's sixth month, Mary hears of Elizabeth's coming child from the angel, Gabriel. He tells Mary that she will conceive a son, Jesus, who will be called "the Son of the Most High." Mary's first response is to go and visit Elizabeth. If she found that Elizabeth was indeed pregnant the angel's message would be validated. Little did Mary know how the Holy Spirit would move to confirm the angel's words that day.

pregnancy illuminates our understanding of Christ's coming as God in the flesh. Think of the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ while they are both yet in the wombs of their mothers. Jesus was the tiniest of embryos—only a few days or weeks old—yet at the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby boy, John the Baptist, leaps! This yet-to-be-born baby, who will "make ready

for the Lord a people prepared" began to fulfill his calling in that moment by leaping at the prompting of the Holy Spirit in recognition of the presence of his Lord. His mother, Elizabeth, was also filled with the Holy Spirit. Before Mary is able to tell her she has conceived a child, Elizabeth loudly proclaims a blessing on the "fruit of your womb" and calls Mary the "mother of my Lord."

Luke's account makes unmistakably clear the fact that Jesus identified with humanity not only from the moment of his birth but from the moment of conception. The God of glory laid down his power and became the most vulnerable of all human beings, an embryo. Emanuel, God with us!

What Would Jesus Say About Abortion?

—By Rev. Jodi Mathews

What would Jesus say about abortion? Christians on both sides of the abortion debate would say that Jesus was on their side. How would they know? Did Jesus ever actually speak to the topic? Certainly not directly. Abortion wasn't a common practice in first century Palestine, and there were no clinics available to women to abort their babies, so the subject didn't come up.

As a woman who is old enough to remember when abortion was still illegal, I remember pondering the question, "What would Jesus say about it?" way back in the beginning stages of the sexual revolution of the 1960's. Several of my girlfriends were getting abortions, as they discovered that they were pregnant. Most of us back then were ambivalent in our opinion on the matter. I think that intuitively, we felt it was morally wrong, but on the other hand, we weren't sure. After all, if the embryo isn't really a person yet, what difference does it make? And faced with the choice of simply removing the unwanted embryo with a simple surgical procedure, or going through with the pregnancy and the shame and embarrassment that came with it, not to mention the inconvenience of it, hey...let's opt for simplicity!

But there's still that niggling question, what would Jesus say about it? I suspect his answer would be along the same lines as his answer when asked about divorce. Some Pharisees approached Jesus to test him (never a smart idea). Matthew recounts this incident in Matthew 19:1-9:



Julia in utero and as a little girl.

The story of Elizabeth's

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The Pharisees wanted to know which school of thought Jesus sided with in the debate about the interpretation of Moses' law which permitted divorce, from Deuteronomy 24:1-4. According to one interpretation, a husband was allowed to divorce his wife if she was unfaithful to him. Clearly, Jesus sided with this side of the debate, but the more important point is that Jesus superseded Moses' command by reinstating God's original intention in marriage: that "the two shall become one flesh. They are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

Yikes! Jesus never casually sanctions sin, as in "Oh, in your case, go ahead!" Instead, he names it for what it is: "Your hearts were hard." That's why Moses permitted divorce. But it is certainly NOT what God wants in a marriage relation-

ship. You should never ask Jesus a sticky question unless you're prepared for an answer that will pierce your heart.

So if I were to ask Jesus, "What do you think about abortion?" I imagine it would be similar to his response about divorce. It would sound something like this:

Haven't you read that in the beginning, "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number.' God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:26, 27, 31) Therefore, what God has created as good, let not any man destroy.

Besides, if you would practice what I teach about sexual morality, specifically that sexual intimacy is to be expressed only between a husband and a wife, then the question of abortion would be a moot point. You wouldn't need to be asking me about it because God intended from the beginning that children be conceived in marriage and raised by both a father and a mother.

We may offer up all kinds of exceptions, the way the people did regarding divorce. But Jesus said that even in the case of infidelity, divorce is still not God's design for us, even if he permits it in extreme cases. In the same way, we may offer up our own personal stories, asking to be excused from the norm God has set in place for us. But terminating the life of an

unborn child, except to save the life of the mother, is simply the result of hard hearts. No matter which way I look at it, I cannot visualize Jesus telling a woman to go ahead and get an abortion.

I can, however, very clearly see Jesus offering a woman who has had an abortion acceptance, love, forgiveness, and hope for a new future. Just as he said to the woman caught in adultery, "That's okay honey, you just go on ahead and just don't get caught next time." Actually what he said is, "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:11).

Never ask Jesus a question about morality unless you are prepared for him to raise the bar. Remember when Peter asked if he was required to forgive another up to seven times?

Seemed downright generous to Peter. But Jesus said, "Nope. Seventy times seven!" In other words, we have to keep on forgiving people; we're never done. The same principle holds true regarding any moral question. Jesus always raises the bar, never lowers it. This is especially true when it comes to human life. We may not look like much, but to God, each one of us is a masterpiece, and destroying God's handiwork is a very poor choice.

Anyway, that's what I think Jesus would say.

What do you think he would say?

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Please join PPL's 10-10-10 Campaign in 2010

I hope you will partner with PPL in 2010 as we prepare for General Assembly in July and launch a new Bible Study, *Pregnant Women of the Bible*. We need your help to continue PPL's important witness in the PC(USA) and proclaim the message of God's character and his love for his people as told in the Biblical stories of pregnant women. I invite you to join us by doing three things:

10

Educate 10

Tell 10 people about PPL. Start by copying this newsletter and giving it to 10 of your friends.

10

Give \$10

If you are already giving to PPL, could you increase your monthly giving by \$10 or 10%?

10

Pray 10

PPL depends on God and we need your prayers. Pray 10 minutes weekly or daily.