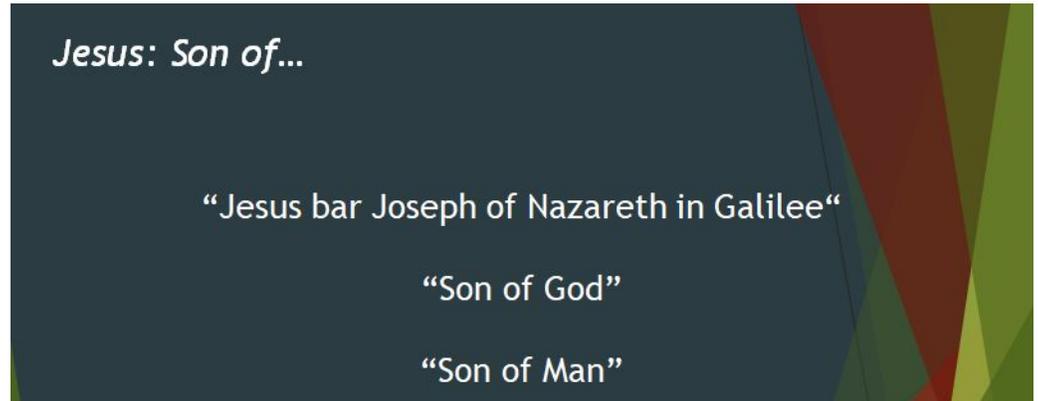


“For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given.”

Like any baby, the first fact
of Jesus’ life is his
relationship status: child of
_____ We know nothing
independent about his
personality, his physical
characteristics, his sense of
self and mission and purpose. He’s just Jesus, Son of Mary; Son of Joseph; Son of God.



By the custom of the day, those “Son of” titles stayed with Jesus long into his adult life. “bar Joseph” would have been his surname, “son of Joseph,” with the further descriptor “of Nazareth” added as necessary.

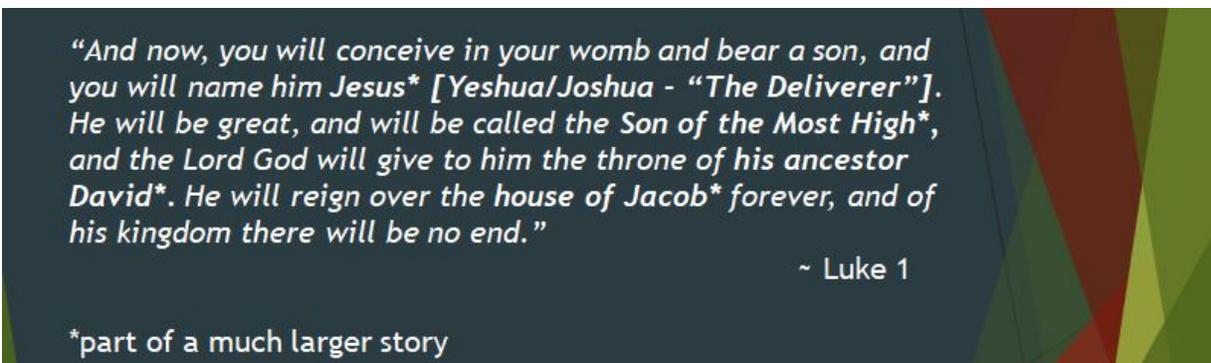
The New Testament writers also emphasize Jesus’ title as the Son of God. And the gospels tell that Jesus often spoke of himself in the third person, using the title “Son of Man.”

The title of Son is integral to Jesus’ identity. So what does it mean?

The first thing about being known as the Child of so-and-so is that it indicates that the story does not begin with you. “Oh, you’re Barb and Denny’s son.” I must have heard that thousands of times as a kid. It let me know that people knew all kinds of things about me--that I was a farm kid, where I went to church, where I went to school, and of course who they’d be talking to if my behaviour fell short of expected standards!

Before anything else, that family heritage told me who I was and what was expected of me, that I was part of a story much larger than just myself.

That larger story was the centerpiece of the angel’s birth announcement to Mary:

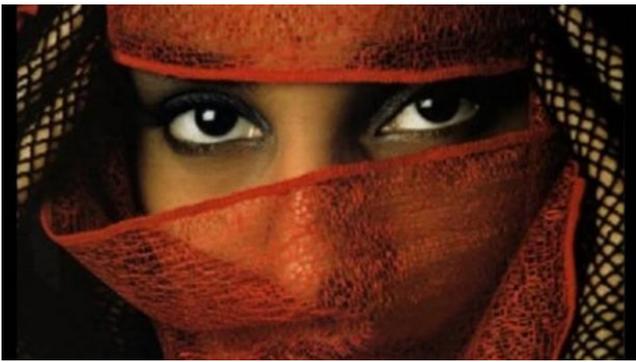


Welcome to the big leagues, kid. The Deliverer, God's Chosen One, heir to the High King, Leader of the People of God. World without end.

Almost everything we're told about Jesus' birth is aimed at establishing Jesus' claim to the story of Israel. The genealogies of Jesus give his family history, a bloodline filled with the heroes and kings of God's People. The settings of Nazareth and Bethlehem and Egypt, all have historical significance. And the references to prophecy, of the star and the wise men, of the virgin birth, of the escape from King Herod, all of those ground Jesus' birth in that greater story.

This thing that's happened, this isn't something entirely new, this is part of that ancient story. And so as faithful hearers, we can't just take Jesus as a solitary figure. We have to see him in the context of that bigger story, that goes all the way back to ancient Israel, to Abraham and Sarah, to Adam and Eve.

And when we look closely at those other characters mentioned in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, we see that this is no ordinary story.



Some of you know the story of Tamar (Genesis 38). Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah, namesake of the Jews, the son of Jacob and Leah, great grandson of Abraham and Sarah.

Tamar was married to Judah's son Er, but he died before they had any children. As was the custom, Tamar was then made the wife of Judah's next son, Onan. But Onan died as well, still no children. So Tamar was then promised to

Judah's third son, Shelah. But Shelah was still a child himself, and honestly Judah had no intent of ever letting this woman bring her curse upon his final son.

So, long story short, Tamar realized that Judah would not let her marry Shelah, so she dressed up as a prostitute and seduced Judah into sleeping with her, without him recognizing her. And Tamar became pregnant and produced evidence that the baby was Judah's child. So Judah admitted that her child was his legitimate/illegitimate heir and gave Tamar a place in his household.

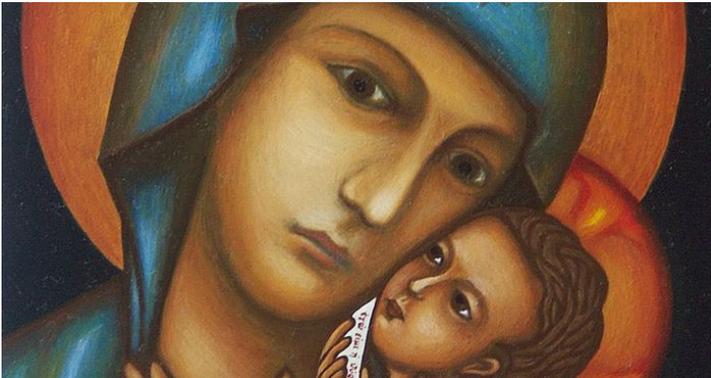
In a final twist to this great drama, Tamar was pregnant with twin boys. When she was giving birth, the first baby put his fist out, and the midwife tied a red string around his wrist. The birth order made a huge deal for status and inheritance, so it was important to mark which was number one and which was number two.

But after the string was tied, the wrist was pulled back in and the second son pushed his way to the front of the line and was born first. So the second son was named Perez, "to burst forth". And the son with the string around his wrist was named Zerah, "the light of dawn." By everything in the customs of the day, Zerah was the firstborn and would have received all of the blessing and inheritance and rights associated with that higher status.



But guess which one is named in Jesus' genealogy? Perez, the illegitimate second son of the scheming adulteress. And for good measure, Tamar is mentioned in Jesus' lineage as well. Along with four other impure women and their illegitimate children.

Someday I'll preach the whole sermon series on the stories from Jesus' genealogies, where over and over again God chose the least likely candidate, the weakest, the illegitimate, the one without status, the outsider, the sinner.



When Mary crafts the line, "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant," she isn't just speaking for herself. She's singing the family theme song.

To be the Son of Mary, and through Mary the Son of David and all the rest, is to be part of this very specific, very human story, of God looking with favor on the lowest of servants.

The second title of Son-ship that the angel slipped into the message to Mary is that her child would be called "the Son of the Most High." The Son of God.

Now, here's where I have to borrow from the Princess Bride:

Everybody knows that Jesus is the Son of God. But I'm not so sure that it means what we think it means.



Demigod - Sometimes we talk about Jesus as though he's a "demigod," like Achilles or Hercules or Maui or Wonder Woman. All the power of a god, all the personality and dramatic tension of a human.

God's Regent - Sometimes we talk about the Son of God in the tradition of the divine right of kings, that being the Son of God means that Jesus is the ruler, reigning on earth on God's behalf, like *Aslan and the Emperor-Over-the-Sea* in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

God the Son - Sometimes we talk about the Son of God meaning that Jesus is separate from God, that God spawned Jesus and sent him to earth to be God's representative here, that God the Parent and Creator stayed up there keeping the universe in order and sent Jesus the Son down to earth to take care of a specific task down here.

God's Offspring - And sometimes we talk about Jesus as God's Son in the relational sense, as though Jesus came from and relates to God in the same way that my children came from and relate to me.



Now, I see some truth in each of those perspectives, but they're also kind of problematic. And I also notice that none of those would have made much sense to the Jewish people of Jesus' day. They had a different way of understanding that phrase "Son of God" that I find helpful.

Bible Quiz time. When Jesus called his disciples in Mark chapter 3, he called a set of brothers, James and John the sons of a man named Zebedee. And he gave them a nickname, *Boanerges*.

Anyone know what this nickname means? "Sons of Thunder." Pretty cool nickname, right?

What does it say about these two guys that Jesus would call them, "Sons of Thunder"? In one of the stories in the gospel of Luke (Luke 9), Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria, when it's time to stop for the night. But when the villagers heard that Jesus and his friends were Jews on the way to Jerusalem, they closed their doors and wouldn't give them a place to stay for the night. Samaritans and Jews did not mix.

So when James and John heard this, what do you think the Sons of Thunder said? "Jesus, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" If that seems like a slight overreaction to you, Jesus agreed. He calmly told the Sons of Thunder to knock it off, and they all went down the road and spent the night in the next village.

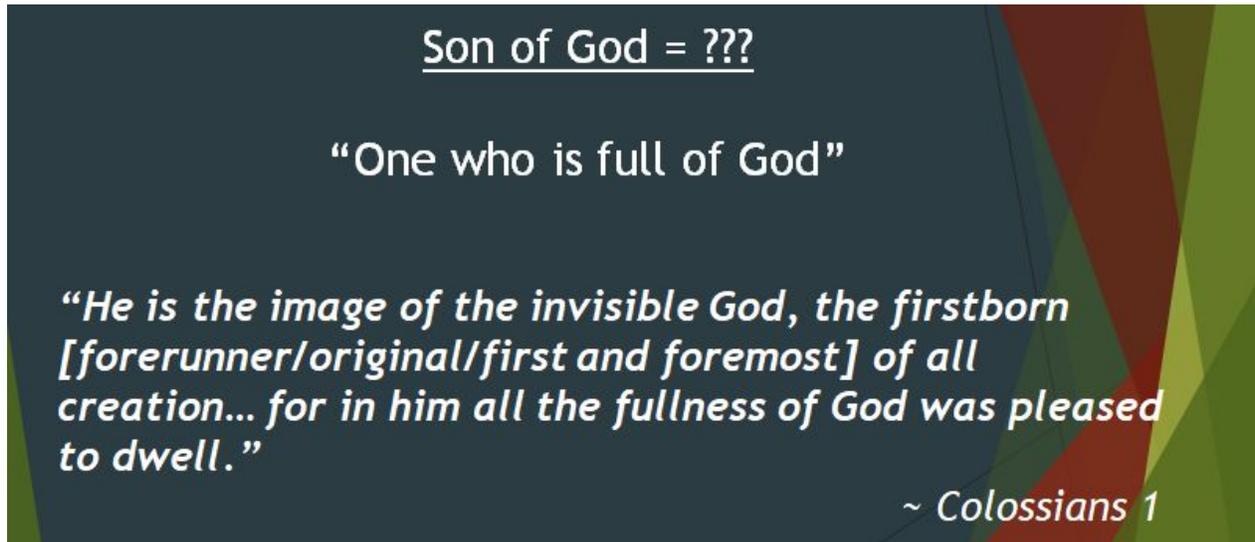
The Sons of Thunder were hotheads, zealots, ready to shoot first and ask questions later. BOOM! To be called a Son of Thunder was a commentary on their essence, their character, who they were at the core.



So, when Jesus will be called the Son of the Most High, in that Aramaic tradition, it was a figure of speech meaning that his character was like God, his essence was the essence of God, he was filled with the Spirit of God.

When you looked at Jesus, when you understood him, you saw God.

The Apostle Paul put it in this way in his letter to the Colossians:



The language is relational, but it's about more than the father-son connection. It's about identity, it's about status and character, it's about fullness.

As James and John were full of Thunder, Jesus is full of God.

So to know Jesus is to know the essence of God.



Now that's a bit mind-bending on Christmas, when Jesus is a baby in a manger. It's tempting to look at the cute baby and say, one day, he's going to grow up and become the Messiah, the God-Man. Or, look at that, God laid down his power to become this helpless, vulnerable baby.

But what if this baby isn't just part of God, God Jr, but actually the Son of God, the essence and fullness of God?

I like how [Brian Zahnd wrote about it in his blog](#) this week:

We who confess Jesus as the virgin-born Son of God should realize this:

If this is God...thus is God.

God is the Almighty who chooses absolute vulnerability.

God is the Divine Sovereign who accepts human limitation.

God is the Ultimate Transcendence who joins in human suffering.

God is the rightful Monarch who becomes a displaced refugee.

God is the Infinite who empties himself.

God is the God who becomes human.

God is the God who becomes common.

God is the God who becomes poor.

When we look at Jesus born in a cave in Bethlehem, fleeing a maniacal despot into Egypt, toiling as a common laborer in Nazareth, we have to say: If this is God...thus is God. And that forces us to rethink most of our assumptions about power, greatness, and the way the world is arranged.

The Son of God, thus is God.

One more “Son” title. As I said, the one that Jesus used to describe himself most often, was “Son of Man.”

Again, there are multiple possibilities for what this might mean, and the New Testament writers liked to play with those ambiguities to get add several layers of meaning to a single line or story.

From the perspective of the “Son of something” as a first century Aramaic figure of speech, to be a “Son of Man” was to be human at the core. Fully human, human by nature, humanity lives here.

One of my favourite television shows lately is called [*This Is Us*](#). It follows the life of a family of triplets born in 1980, and it blends the stories of their childhood and their parents in with their lives as adults. It’s about their struggles and insecurities, family drama and intergenerational conflict, and adoption and race relations, and body image and career struggles, and singleness and marriage and parenting and loneliness and dying... It’s a real tear-jerker most of the time.



That title really draws me into the show. “This Is Us.” These stories and struggles are familiar to me on a deep level. I’m not like any of the characters, I’ve never been adopted or had a parent die or dealt with a blended-race family. But somehow, when I watch the show, I can relate, I can connect with what these fictional characters are going through. This is a human story, this is *my* story, too.

Jesus: Son of Man.



“One who is full of Humanity”

That’s what I see when Jesus called himself “Son of Man” - This is your story, too, this is what it means to be human, my life is your life. The true human. Not the best life or the ideal life, but nothing less than truly human. This is what life is meant to be, about love and purpose and community and giving of yourself for the good of others. The kind of life that Jesus lived is the kind of life that we are all meant to live.

So, Jesus is the Son of Mary and Joseph, part of this long tradition of God showing up in the most unlikely people and places.

And Jesus is the Son of God, “in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

And Jesus is the Son of Man, the true human, living a life that is authentic and meaningful and whole.

The miracle of the Incarnation, the Christmas story, is that all of this is bound up in a single person, one tiny baby. The fullness of God and the fullness of Humanity, in one life.

That’s impossibly amazing.

And so, I think, even those of us who believe this miracle story tend to keep it at arm’s length. We celebrate Christmas, we tell the stories and sing the songs, we worship the baby along with the angels and shepherds and kings. But we have a hard time entering in. We remember the story, we celebrate it as the birthday of Jesus, a holy day, we’re grateful that God came to earth that one time and did that one thing for us. But we keep it on a shelf, characters in a fancy nativity set, to look at but not to touch.



To treat this day as a story of Christmases long, long ago is to miss the good news.

The good news, as written by the Apostle John, is that this is our story, now:

*See what love our Creator has given us,
that we should be called children of God;
and that is what we are.*

~ 1 John 3:1

Everything that I've said about Jesus is also true of us. We are "Sons of God" in the first-century Aramaic sense of the phrase, female and male, *the fullness of God dwelling in us*.

To some, that sounds like blasphemy, to say that God is in us and in some real way we are God. To most, in our inner thoughts and feelings, that sounds impossible--not me, I'm too sinful or selfish or broken. But that's the core of the Bible story, that's what it means to be made in the image of God, to be followers of Jesus, to be the Body of Christ, to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

It's not that Jesus was a special baby, the fusion of humanity and divinity. *It's that we are all special babies:* humanity and divinity have always been fused together. God has always been present in God's creation. We are all the Children of God. Jesus' birth was a revelation that the presence of God is already here among us, within us.

At risk of copyright infringement...



The Christmas Story is our story.

This story of true humanity, of life lived in the fullness of vulnerability and risk and love and loss and joy and self-sacrifice, this is our story.

This story of the People of God, of Mary and Tamar and Judah and Perez, of God choosing those without status, those who are nothing, this is our story.

And yes, this story of God's Presence with us and *in* us, of bearing God's image and of being the fullness of God, together, this is our story.

This is who you are, child of God, one in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.

And just as with that baby in a manger, being the Child of God is not the destination, but the door through which a real life begins. Christmas is not a unique moment long ago, but a calling to live into.

Merry Christmas! May we see God born among us this day, in each other and in ourselves.
For that is what we are.