Why Come to Earth?

The only way God could get through . . .

They were terrified and asked each other, "who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him!" Mark 4:41

American radio broadcaster Paul Harvey once told a modern parable about a religious skeptic who worked as a farmer. One raw winter night the man heard an irregular thumping sound against the kitchen storm door. He went to a window and watched as tiny shivering sparrows, attracted to the evident warmth inside, beat in vain against the glass.

Touched, the farmer bundled up and trudged through fresh snow to open the barn door for the struggling birds. He turned on the lights and tossed some hay in a corner. But the sparrows, which had scattered in all directions when he emerged from the house, hid in the darkness, afraid.

The man tried various tactics to get them into the barn. He laid down a trail of Saltine cracker crumbs to direct them. He tried circling behind the birds to drive them toward the barn. Nothing worked. He, a huge, alien creature, had terrified them; the birds couldn't comprehend that he actually desired to help.

The farmer withdrew to his house and watched the doomed sparrows through a window. As he stared, a thought hit him like lightning from a clear blue sky: *If only I could become a bird – one of them – just for a moment. Then I wouldn't frighten them so. I could show them the way to warmth and safety.*

At the same moment, another thought dawned on him. He had grasped the reason Jesus was born.

When God Came to Earth

A man becoming a bird is nothing compared to God becoming a man. The concept of a sovereign eternal being who created the universe, confining himself to a human body was – and is – too much for some people to believe. But how else could God truly communicated with us?

We don't know what God looked like as a man; no Gospel writer described the physical appearance of Jesus. But, in other ways, Mark painted a full picture of his humanity. Jesus, who claimed to be God, didn't have a supernatural "glow" about him. His own neighbors and family marveled that he seemed – so, well, normal.

Mark does not diminish Jesus. He shows the power of a man who healed the blind with a simple touch, *Mark 6:25*, and the authority of a teacher so captivating that people sat three days straight, with empty stomachs, just to hear him, *Mark 8:2.* Even after Jesus hushed them,

people wouldn't stop talking about his miracles.

But Mark also reveals the full range of Jesus' emotions: a surge of compassion for a person with leprosy, *Mark 1:41*, a deep sigh in response to nagging Pharisees, *Mark 8:12*, a look of anger and distress at coldhearted legalists, *Mark 3:5,* and then an awful cry on the cross, My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" *Mark 15:34.* Jesus was sometimes witty, and he sometimes cried. He got tired: five times, Mark records he sought a quiet place for rest away from the crowds.

Like No One Else

Jesus was like no other person who ever lived. Twelve men left their jobs and families at a single command to follow him. Yet Jesus was also fully "one of us." He needed food and friends. He got lonely and tired. He showed anger and disappointment. Because Jesus experienced all we experience as human beings, he can understand us completely, and share in our joys and sorrows.

Mark portrays both sides of Jesus – the divine and the human. The disciples needed to see both dimensions to give their lives to him.

Life Questions: Suppose that Jesus had never come, that God had merely sent an elaborate love note. What difference would that make?

A Candy Maker's Witness

"And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21

A candy maker in Indiana wanted to make candy that would be a witness, so he made the Christmas candy cane. He incorporated several symbols for the birth, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ.

He began with a stick of pure white, hard candy. white to symbolize the virgin Birth and the sinless nature of Jesus, and hard to symbolize the solid rock, the foundation of the church, and firmness of the promises of God.

The candy maker made the candy in the form of a "J" to represent the precious name of Jesus, who came to earth as our Savior. It could also represent the staff of the "Good Shepherd" with which He reaches down into the ditches of the world to lift out the fallen lambs who, like all sheep, have gone astray.

Thinking that the candy was somewhat plain, the candy maker stained it with red stripes. He used three small stripes to show the stripes of the scourging Jesus received by which we are healed. The large red stripe was for the blood shed by Christ on the cross so that we could have the promise of eternal life.

Unfortunately, the candy became known as the Candy Cane – a meaningless decoration seen at Christmas time. But the meaning is still there for those who "have eyes to see and ears to hear." I pray that this symbol will again be used to witness to the wonder of Jesus and His Great Love that came down at Christmas and remains the ultimate and dominate force in the universe today.

Angels on the Subway

Sternberger, a New York portrait photographer living in a Long Island suburb, had for years followed an unchanging routine in going from his home to his office on Fifth Avenue. A methodical man of nearly 50, with bushy white hair, guileless brown eyes and the bouncing enthusiasm of a Czardas dancer of his native Hungary, Sternberger always took the 9:09 Long Island Railroad train to Woodside, where he caught a subway into the city.

On the morning of January 10, 1948 he boarded the 9:09 as usual. En route he suddenly decided to visit Laszlo Victor, a Hungarian friend who lived in Brooklyn and who was ill.

"I don't know why I decided to go see him that morning," Sternberger recounted some weeks afterward. "I could have done it after office hours; but I kept thinking that he could stand a little cheering up."

Accordingly, at Ozone Park Sternberger changed to the subway for Brooklyn, went to his friend's house and stayed until the middle of the afternoon. He then boarded a Manhattan-bound subway for his office.

The car was crowded, and there seemed to be no chance of a seat. But just as he entered, a man sitting by the door suddenly jumped up to leave, and he slipped into the empty place.
Sternberger had been living in New York long enough not to start conversations with strangers. But being a photographer, he was struck by the features of the passenger on his left. The man appeared to be in his late 30s, and his eyes contained a look of inexpressible sadness. He was reading a Hungarian newspaper, and something prompted Sternberger to turn to him and say in Hungarian, "I hope you don't mind if I glance at your paper."

The man seemed surprised to be addressed in his native language but he answered politely, "You may read it now; I'll have time later on."

During the half hour ride to town they had quite a conversation. The man said his name was Paskin. A law student when the war started, he had been put into a labor battalion and sent to the Ukraine. Later he was captured by the Russians and put to work burying the German dead. After the war he had covered hundreds of miles on foot until he reached his home in Debrecen, a large city in eastern Hungary.

Sternberger himself knew Debrecen quite well, and they talked about it for a while. Then Paskin told the rest of his story. When he went to the apartment once occupied by his father, mother, brother, and sisters, he found strangers living there. Then he went upstairs to the apartment he and his wife once had. It also was occupied by strangers. None of them had ever heard of his family.

As he was leaving, full of sadness, a boy ran after him calling, "Paskin, bacsi!

Paskin, bacsi!" Bacsi means uncle, and the child turned out to be the son of some old neighbors of Paskin's. Going back to the boy's home to talk with his parents he learned that his whole family was dead. The Nazis had taken them, and his wife had been sent to Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was the worst of the concentration camps. Paskin thought of the Nazi gas chambers, and gave up all hope. A few days later, too heartsick to remain any longer in Hungary – which to him was now a funeral land – he set out again on foot, stealing across border after border until he reached Paris. He had managed to emigrate to the United States in October of 1947, just three months before.

All the time Paskin had been talking Sternberger kept thinking that somehow his story seemed familiar. Suddenly he know why! A young woman whom he had met recently at the home of friends had also been from Debrecen. She had been sent to Auschwitz, and from there she had been transferred to work in a German

munitions factory. Her relatives had been killed in the gas chambers. Later she was liberated by the Americans and was brought to the United States in the first boat load of displaced persons in 1946. Her story had moved Sternberger so much that he had written down her address and phone number, intending to invite her to meet his family and thus relieve the terrible emptiness in her present life.

It seemed impossible that there could be any connection between these two people, but when Sternberger reached his station he stayed on the train and asked in what he hoped was a casual voice, "Is your first name Bela?" Paskin turned pale and answered, "Yes. How did you know?" Sternberger fumbled anxiously in his address book. "Was your wife's name Marya?" Pasken looked as if he were about to faint. "Yes! Yes!" he said.

Sternberger said, "Let's get off the train." He took Paskin by the arm at the next station and led him to a phone booth. Paskin stood there like a man in a trance while Sternberger searched for the number in his address book. It seemed like hours before he had the woman called Marya Paskin on the other end. Later he learned that her room was alongside the telephone, but she had the habit of never answering it because she had so few friends and the calls were always for somebody else.

When he heard her voice at last, he told her who he was and asked her to describe her husband. She seemed surprised at the question, but gave him a description. Then he asked her where she had lived in Debrecen, and she gave him the address. Asking her to hold the phone he turned to Paskin and said, "Did you and your wife live on such and such a street/"

"Yes!" Paskin exclaimed. He was white as a sheet and trembling. "Try to be calm," Sternberger urged him. "Something miraculous is about to happen to you. Here, take this telephone and talk to your wife!"

Paskin nodded his head in mute bewilderment, his eyes bright with tears. He took the receiver, listened a moment to his wife's voice, then suddenly cried, "This is Bela, this is Bela!" and began to mumble hysterically. Seeing that the poor fellow was so excited he couldn't talk coherently, Sternberger took the receiver from his shaking hands. He began talking to Marya who also sounded hysterical.

"Stay were you are," he told her. "I am sending your husband to you. He will be there in a few minutes."

Bela Paskin was crying like a baby and saying over and over again, "It is my wife, I go to my wife!" At first Sternberger thought he had better accompany Paskin lest the man faint from excitement, but decided that this was a moment in which no strangers should intrude. Putting Paskin in a taxi he directed the driver to take him to Marya's address, paid the fare and said goodbye.

Bela Paskin's reunion with his wife was a moment so poignant, so electric with suddenly released emotion that afterward neither he nor Marya could recall much about it.

"I remember only that when I left the phone I walked to the mirror like in a dream to see if maybe my hair had turned gray," she said later. "The next thing I knew a taxi had stopped in front of the house, and it was my huband who came toward me. Details I cannot remember; only this I know – that I was happy for the first time in many years.

"Even now it is difficult to believe that it happened. We have both suffered so much that I am hardly able to be unafraid. Each time my husband goes out the door I ask myself, will anything happen to take him away from me again?!"

Bela Paskin is confident that no horrible misfortune will ever again befall them. "Providence has brought us together," he says simply. "It was meant to be."

Skeptical persons would no doubt attribute the events of that memorable afternoon to mere chance. But was it chance that made Sternberger suddenly decide to visit a sick frienc, and hence take a subway line he had never ridden before? Was it chance that caused the man sitting by the door to rush out just as Sternberger came in? Was it chance that caused Bela Paskin to be reading a Hungarian newspaper?

Was it all chance" Or did angels ride the Brooklyn subway with them that afternoon?

"He who constantly depends upon God through simple trust and prayerful conficence will be surrounded by the angels of heaven." *In Heavenly Places p. 16.*

"He shall give His angels charge over thee . . . They shall bear thee up in their hands." *Psalms 91: 11, 12*