

“Like a Virgin”

Luke 1:26-38

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The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Prayer: As the pace quickens, O God, give us quiet moments as we open your word to hear what you would have us hear. And in these quiet moments, may we also hear angels singing as we prepare to welcome a newborn king. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.

“How can this be?” blurts out a frightened and confused Mary at the angel’s bizarre announcement. Doesn’t the angel know how things work? For something to happen, something else has to happen first? Right? But “How can this be” might also be the cry of modern day thoughtful people, struggling to reconcile what the Christian faith claims regarding Jesus’ birth, with their more rational, scientific sensibilities.

Believing in the literal truth of the virgin birth has become, in some circles, a kind of litmus test measuring the sincerity of one’s faith. Take away the virgin birth of Jesus and the whole House of Cards comes tumbling down. I think that is a very misguided approach to things and certainly, was not at all the story’s intent. So I’d like us to spend a few moments this morning thinking about this mysterious birth. Before we do that, however, I’d like to share with you something that Kathleen Norris wrote as a poet, and as someone who fell away from the faith of her childhood only to find her way back. Norris says,

I once heard a protestant clergywoman say to an ecumenical assembly, “We all know there was no Virgin Birth. Mary was just an unwed, pregnant teenager, and God told her it was ok. That’s the message we need to give girls today, that God loves them, and forget all that nonsense about a Virgin Birth.” A gasp went up; people shook their heads. This was the first (and only) gratuitously offensive remark made at a convention marked by theological diversity. They were not at all pleased to hear a well-educated, middle-class white woman say that all we need to tell pregnant teenagers is, “It’s ok.”

Norris continues,

I realize that my own anger at the woman’s arrogance had deep personal roots. I was taken back to my teenage years, when the “demythologizing” of Christianity that I had encountered in a misguided study of modern theology had led me to conclude that there

was little in religion for me. In the classroom, at least, it seemed that anything in the Bible that didn't stand up to reason, that we couldn't explain, was primitive, infantile [and] ripe for discarding. So I took all my longing for the sacred, for mystery, into the realm of poetry, and found a place there. Now more than thirty years later, I sat in a room full of Christians and thought, *My God, they're still at it, trying to leach every bit of mystery out of this religion, still substituting the most trite language imaginable. You're ok, the boy you screwed when you were both too drunk to stand is ok, all God chooses to say about it is, it's ok* (*Amazing Grace*, pp. 72-3).

Well, our job today is not to demythologize this mystery or worse yet, discard it. Our job as thoughtful Christians is to embrace it. And I would argue that in order to embrace it in a meaningful way—in order for Mary's story to have any relevancy for your life, you must first understand it.

It is no secret that the birth narratives were later additions to the Gospel record. Mark, the earliest Gospel written, and John, perhaps the last one written, do not include the story of Jesus' birth—only Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth. And the earliest of the New Testament writers, the Apostle Paul, makes no mention of Christ's birth. That means at the very least, that it is possible to faithfully tell the story of Jesus and his ministry without getting hung up on the details of his birth.

Marcus Borg calls the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, both of which were written near the end of the first century, overtures to the Gospels themselves—later additions that set the tone for the story to follow. That the details between Matthew and Luke are so different suggests just that, that they were later additions created in order to convey special messages. For example, in Matthew, Jesus is the "King of the Jews," so his ancestry is traced through the kings of Judah. For Luke, Jesus is a Spirit-anointed social prophet, and so his ancestry in Luke includes the prophets.

And Jesus' miraculous birth is not the only miraculous birth story to shape and influence the history of Israel. Perhaps it's why we need to understand the virgin birth in terms of what that unique birth represents. And I would propose to you that what it represents is *not* the ultimate test of your faith and whether or not it's sincere, but rather it represents the church's struggle from its earliest days to understand and describe this unique one who had appeared on the scene some 2,000 years ago, literally changing the face of the world by showing us the face of God.

Believing that in Jesus, God had really come among us, those early Christians knew that it was necessary to believe that Jesus was fully human. Not everyone did, however. Docetism, for example, which gets its name from the Greek word meaning "seeming," argued that because Jesus was fully divine he only appeared or seemed to be human. The church rejected that and recognized the need to hold to the dual nature of Jesus as both human and divine.

Understanding Jesus to be without sin, it was therefore necessary to believe that Jesus' mother was pure and uncorrupted, which are other definitions of the word virgin.

The early church also understood Mary symbolically as representing not only all of humanity but the church itself. In other words, while coming to certain conclusions about Mary and her role and the nature of her birth, the church wasn't necessarily hung up on the story being grounded in history and fact as it was intent on articulating the way in which those things symbolized the mystical union between God and humanity in the mystical body of Christ, the church.

The virgin birth is one of the church's earliest confessional statements regarding the nature and mystery of Jesus as we have come to understand him. And frankly, it is more of a statement about the nature of Jesus than it is a statement about the gynecological condition of his birth mother. And I would like to propose that to understand and accept the virgin birth does not require one to first accept it as a biological marvel or a supernatural occurrence that somehow definitively proves that Jesus is who we say he is and is who we believe him to be. I just don't think that's the point of it.

Some things don't have to be factually true in order to be true. There is power in myth and it is real, as Joseph Campbell reminded us. And Kathleen Norris is right, our job as modern day Christians isn't to discard aspects of the biblical narrative that don't make sense to us, but is rather about accepting those things that our forefathers and mothers in the faith had embraced, and yet understanding how those things speaks to us today.

I mean, of far greater significance than the nature of Jesus' birth and whether or not his birth mother was a virgin, are the really important questions about Jesus such as,

Is Jesus the light of the world?

Is Jesus the way, the truth and the life?

Is Jesus the Lord of your life?

Is what happened in him truly of God?

Because how you respond to those questions will change your life.

The thirteenth century Christian mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart, in one of his sermons delivered some six hundred years ago, spoke of the virgin birth as something that happens within us. That is the story of the virgin birth is really the story of Christ being born within us through the union of the Spirit of God with our earthly flesh. Ultimately that means that the remarkable story of Jesus' birth isn't about the past, it's about the present and the internal birth this season asks us to embrace.

Come to us...abide with us...be born in us today, the old carol reminds us.

And so if we dare to believe that Mary wasn't actually a virgin, we should also dare to believe with full conviction and a clear conscience that she was *like* a virgin. That despite her awkward predicament and the desperate condition in which she found herself, God saw her *not* as the scandal society would have seen her as had they known about her condition, but as innocent and pure—as one who in spite of her circumstances was nonetheless undefiled.

And so what is hidden deep in the story of God's coming to Mary in this mysterious way is the staggering good news *not* that everything is ok, but rather when it's not ok, when you are frightened and most alone, when you are feeling unsure of yourself and are most vulnerable, God comes to you as well in just such moments.

And hidden in the message of God's coming to Mary is our hope, that it is always possible for the tarnished and the tattered, to become shiny again. That virginity is a state of mind more than it is a physical characteristic. Because God has come among us in the person of Jesus the Christ, it is always possible for the old to become new, for the worn to become fresh, for sinners to be forgiven, for light to shine the darkness, and for the dry, parched landscapes of this world to break forth in blossom.

Amen.