

WHAT DO WE AFFIRM WHEN WE SAY HE WAS "CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT AND BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY"

Luke 1:26-38

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson
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"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin... The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus....' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" Luke 1:26-28, 30-31, 34.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ. Every week millions of Christians around the world confess, "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary." But a number of religious leaders deny the Virgin Birth of Christ. One of the most prominent is Bishop Spong, an Episcopalian bishop. He's written several books telling us that modern men and women can no longer believe the myth of the Virgin Birth. From time to time church members have expressed to me their unbelief or doubts about the Virgin Birth. Sometimes they express their unbelief defiantly and proudly as a vocal reaction against strident fundamentalism which threatens us with hell if we don't believe. Sometimes church members express their doubts about the Virgin Birth with great anxiety about whether they can be Christians. "How can I call myself a Christian if I can't believe in the Virgin Birth?"

When I was being interviewed by a senior pastor my senior year in seminary for a position as assistant pastor, I was asked about my belief in the Virgin Birth. I told him I believe. I find the doctrine of the Virgin Birth quite meaningful. But, I said, I don't believe one *must* believe in the Virgin Birth to be a Christian. We shouldn't exclude people who find the Virgin Birth hard to swallow. I realize that many Christians struggle with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Some people reject it because they find the doctrine incompatible with the teaching of science and biology. The Virgin Birth is a biological impossibility. Some people reject it because they believe it expresses an unhealthy rejection of human sexuality. The belief arose out of the fear and loathing of sex that some people have always had. Other's reject it because

they believe it undermines the humanity of Christ. How could Jesus be truly human if he didn't have a human father as well as mother? These are good but inadequate reasons for rejecting the Virgin Birth. I believe that truth is stranger and less predictable than we use to think. It's not good to limit truth to what we experience or understand. I also believe that sex is a good gift of God and that Jesus is fully human and yet I believe in the Virgin Birth.

But I can understand and sympathize with people who have a hard time believing in the Virgin Birth. Modern men and women are not the only ones who have had trouble believing in the Virgin Birth of Christ. The very first person who had great difficulty believing in the Virgin Birth was none other than the Virgin Mary. When the angel Gabriel announced to her that she would conceive and bear a son her immediate response was, "How can this be?" Mary was no fool. She knew where babies come from - not from the stork and not from the strawberry patch. She had a difficult time understanding and believing at first, but she responded, "Let it be."

Kathleen Norris has recently published a book titled, *Amazing Grace*. At one point she describes a heated exchange between a seminary student and a Christian Eastern Orthodox theologian. The theologian had just finished his lecture on the development of the Church's Creeds. The student asked, "What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?" The Orthodox priest responded, "Well, you just say it. It's not hard to master. With a little effort most learn it by heart." Thinking he'd been misunderstood, the student tried again, "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed like the Virgin Birth?" He got the same response. "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It'll come to you eventually." The student raised his voice. "How can I with integrity affirm a creed which I do not believe?" The priest responded, "It's not your creed. It's our creed. It belongs to the Body of Christ. We say it not because we are certain of it, but because Christ is." [M. Craig Barnes, *Doubtful Disciples*, Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, July/August 1999]

Why do we repeat the Creed Sunday after Sunday? Why don't we all stand up and say whatever we're feeling? One person might stand and say, "I believe in reincarnation." Another

person might say, "I believe that all religions are equally true." Still another might say, "I simply can't believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ." But we invite all present to stand and say the words of a creed, sometimes *The Apostles' Creed*, sometimes *The Nicene Creed*, sometimes a contemporary creed, like *The Study Catechism*. We ask you to repeat these words, like parents teach our children to say, *Thank you* and *I'm sorry* and *Excuse me* even when they aren't thankful or sorry. We hope that by saying the word they will eventually feel the feelings.

A marriage counselor once told me that sometimes a husband will come to him and say, "I no longer love my wife." He asks the husband, "When was the last time you told her that you love her?" "Oh, I haven't told her for a couple of years." "Well, no wonder you no longer love her. You need to tell her." "But you don't understand. I don't tell her because I no longer feel love her." "Ah, its the other way around. You no longer love her because you've stopped saying the words. The important question is, 'Do you want to feel love for your wife again?' Because if you want to rekindle your love you need to express love. You need to start telling her again that you love her (like you did when you first fell in love). You need to tell her even when you don't feel it. Do you want to feel love for her again? Then bring her flowers, write her a love poem, take her on a date. Take time to listen to her. Talk to her. Look her in the eyes when she speaks. Do that and you eventually come to love her again."

Belief in the Virgin Birth is something like that. Faith in Christ is like that. As the millennium turns, this Christmas gives us another opportunity to reflect on the mystery of the Word of God made flesh in the Virgin Mary.

The Rev. William Willimon teaches at Duke University and also Dean of the Chapel. A student once came to him distressed that he was losing his faith. He'd read the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and was having problems with the Virgin Birth. Willimon suggested that he read the Gospel of Mark and the letters of Paul which make no mention of the Virgin Birth.

"But don't I have to believe in the miraculous birth of Jesus in order to believe in Jesus?"

"In one sense, no," Willimon replied. "Yet in another sense, yes. We ask you to believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and, if you can swallow that without choking, then there's no telling

what else we can get you to believe. If we can get you to believe in something easy, like the virgin birth, maybe we can get you to believe that the meek will inherit the earth and that God, not nations, rules the world. We start you out with something fairly small, like the virgin birth, then work you up to even more outrageous assertions.”

Of all Christian beliefs, the Virgin Birth is one of the easiest to believe. It's a lot harder to believe that's it's better to give than to receive. It's hard to believe that we should forgive our enemies or that peacemakers are blessed. And if you're facing your first Christmas without a loved one, it's a whole easier to believe in the Virgin Birth than to believe that those who mourn will be comforted and that the God who came to us in Jesus Christ raises the dead and creates new heavens and earth.

God of grace,
you chose the Virgin Mary, full of grace,
to be the mother of our Lord and Savior.
Now fill us with your grace,
that with her, we may rejoice in your salvation,
and in all things, embrace your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.