

## Virgin

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 20, 1998.  
Scripture lesson: Matthew 1:18-25.

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

I first met her when she was in seventh grade on Philip's soccer team. She was attractive, tall and thin and had beautiful long light brown hair and wore braces on her teeth. When I came to the games to watch Philip play she'd turn around on the bench with a big smile and coyly say, "Hello, Mr. Atkinson." She continued to grow in beauty and attractiveness and I became quite smitten with her. But then I lost track of her. From time to time I'd ask one of my boys, "How's *so-and-so* doing? Who's she dating? Who'd she go to the prom with?" A couple weeks ago all three boys were at home and we were talking. I asked about her. One of them said, "I heard she got pregnant. She'd only known the guy a week." I was shocked. "No! What's she going to do? She's only 18." "The father wanted her to have an abortion but she's decided to keep the baby." I was devastated! Crushed! Frightened! She came from a good family. I'd met her parents. She went to a good church. What happened? It happens in the best of families.

I imagine that's the way people felt when they heard Mary was pregnant. She came from a strong family. Religious. Hard working. Mary was a good girl. She was more religious than the average young girl. She meditated on the Old Testament stories of Hannah, Sarah, Deborah and Esther. She longed for the coming of God's promised Messiah. The Bible doesn't say how old Mary was when she got pregnant. We do know that Palestinian girls in those days were betrothed by the age of twelve or thirteen. Most young girls were married by the time they were old enough to have a baby. Jean Danielou and other Biblical scholars think that Mary was probably only about 14 years old when she gave birth to Jesus.

If ever there was a problem pregnancy Mary had one. The Old Testament law required harsh penalties for fornication and adultery. The United States Congress has impeached President Clinton for his sexual sins. He got off easy. <sup>in 1998</sup> The Old Testament law required the death penalty for adultery. Since Mary was betrothed to be married, getting pregnant to someone

other than Joseph would be considered adultery. So Joseph basically had two choices: he could charge Mary with adultery and expose her to public disgrace and possible death or he could quietly divorce her. Since Joseph was a good man he chose the latter course of action.

But the Bible claims that Mary didn't commit adultery. She <sup>miraculously</sup> got pregnant without ever having had sexual relationships. Matthew writes, "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Christians believe that Mary was a Virgin even though she got pregnant. We believe that the Holy Spirit began a new creation in her. Jesus is the beginning of the new creation. He is the beginning of the creation of new heavens and earth.

Some Christians, like Bishop Spong, have denied the Virgin Birth. They say the belief is unreasonable. Everybody knows that virgins can't have babies. My answer is that people today are not so confident in the ability of reason to tell us what is possible and impossible. I certainly believe in the power of reason but I feel that reason, by itself, can be a harsh taskmaster. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy", the poet said. Just as I believe God created the heavens and earth out of nothing, I believe that God has begun the creation of a new heaven and earth in the conception and birth of Jesus.

Others argue that belief in the Virgin birth undermines the humanity of Jesus. How can Jesus be fully human if he had no biological father. But those of us who believe in the Virgin birth say that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He passed through the same process that every baby passes through, the first trimester, the second and third. He grew in the womb of the virgin just as any child grows inside it's mother. But Jesus was also Emmanuel: From the moment of his conception he was God with us.

What lessons can we learn from this story? Scripture tells us how Mary and Joseph dealt with her problem pregnancy. How should Christians deal with problem pregnancies today? The leads us into some very controversial waters. The official view of the Presbyterian church (U.S.A.) is that the pregnant mother <sup>pro-choice:</sup> should have the right to answer that question in the way that she feels is best for her. However, many Presbyterians identify strongly with the pro-life

position. In fact there's an organization within the Presbyterian Church called *Presbyterians for Life*. And even the pro-choice stand of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has limits. We believe that all abortion is morally ambiguous or questionable. We believe that a woman should never choose an abortion to avoid embarrassment, or as a means of birth control, or in order to choose the gender of the child. That puts quite a limit on abortions. Over 95% of all abortions would be eliminated if those guidelines were carefully followed.

I think it's fair for you to know what I believe. Abortion is an issue over which I have anguished as a pastor. What kind of advice and counsel would I give to a young girl, like Mary, maybe only 14 years old, who came to me with a problem pregnancy? I have counseled women with problem pregnancies and can only begin to feel the agony of their choice. Poverty, homelessness, abandonment and fear leave some women feeling that they have no choice other than abortion. I would like women with problem pregnancies to have other choices beside abortion: the choice to raise the child in a supportive community or the choice to offer up the baby to a couple who are unable to have children. Unfortunately, neither the nation, church or community have the will or desire to provide long term health care and support for single mothers. Until the nation, church and community make a serious commitment to giving real choices for life I see no hope for the reduction of abortion. But I believe that pro-life and pro-choice advocates can unite and find common ground in finding ways to reduce the number of abortions.

I leave you to come to your own conclusions. Meditate upon the story of the conception and birth of Jesus. Does it or should it have any impact on our beliefs and choices today? Or is it simply an old story that has no connection to our world today?

Let us pray: God our Father, you see your children growing up in an unsteady and confusing world: Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you, and to keep alive their joy in your creation. Heavenly Father, you sent your own Son into this world. We thank you for the life of every new born child entrusted to our care. Help us to remember that we are all your children, and so to love and nurture them, that they may attain to that full stature intended for them in your eternal kingdom; for the sake of your dear Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.