

December 12, 2010 – First Baptist Church, Vancouver

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Title: “Believing in Miracles”

“Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”

That is how the world-wide church of Jesus Christ expresses the miracle and mystery we celebrate during the Advent-Christmas season. In the so-called Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.”

Have you ever wondered how Mary expressed it? I have tried to put myself in her place. Especially as she sought to articulate what was happening to her parents!! “Mom ... Dad ... You have to believe me. According to our customs I have not even seen Joseph since the engagement ceremony. An angel came to me ...” “An angel?” “Yes. And said to me, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you ...’ And now ... Well, now I am pregnant. Please, you have to trust me. I have not had sex with a man”.

Is it any wonder that soon after hearing from the angel, Mary left Nazareth, and went to stay with her relative Elizabeth in the hill country of Galilee? Elizabeth is the perfect person with whom to process everything as Elizabeth had also recently conceived a child ... in her old age!! Though in her case the natural way through sexual intercourse with her husband Zachariah.

How did Mary express it when she had to tell her fiancé? Somehow Joseph learned the news. It is hard to keep such news secret in a close-knit social context like that of first century Palestine. Some have suggested that it was Mary’s father who spared her the agony, and carried the news to Joseph’s father. “Jacob Levi”, “Yes?” “We have to sit down. There is a little problem. Listen carefully. An angel visited my daughter ...” “An angel?” “Yes, an angel. And he told Mary, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you ...’ And, well, Jacob now, do not be angry.”

Whatever the means by which Joseph learned the news he was understandably stunned, shaken, shattered. “How can this be? How could she do this to me, to us, to our future?” The only logical explanation is that Mary has been unfaithful to their engagement vows. The only logical explanation is that Mary has broken the terms of the betrothal covenant: she has cheated on Joseph; she has slept with another man. Right? Everyone knows how babies are conceived. Right?

Matthew tells us that Joseph was “a righteous man” (1:19). It is a technical term in the first century. It means that Joseph was a man who is faithful to all his relationships. Especially to his relationship with the Living God, and God’s will as it is expressed in God’s law. Joseph is a “right-relationship” man. That is what “righteousness” means; “right-related-ness.”

According to the law when a woman is unfaithful, she is to be taken to court and openly exposed for breaking the legal bond. So too a man when he is unfaithful to his vow. In the Old Testament book of Numbers (chapter 5), it is stipulated that the priest is to have the woman drink what was

called “water of bitterness.” If she had not been unfaithful she would not get sick. But if she had been unfaithful, the water would make her abdomen swell, and she would “bear the curse,” suffering great public shame.

As Joseph “The righteous man” struggles with his pain, he chooses not to exercise his legal right. Why? Because although he seeks a right relationship with the law, he also seek a right relationship with Mary.

So he plans to go to Mary secretly. According to the law, he would need to bring along two witnesses who would sign a certificate of divorce.

Talk about miracles! Somehow Joseph is able to rise above his personal pain, and seek righteousness, right-related-ness, both with the law he respects and the lady he loves.

While wrestling with this plan, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph. An angel? In a dream. And the angel, (likely the same one who had gone to Mary, Gabriel by name) explains what is going on in Mary’s womb. Mary has not been unfaithful. Not at all. The angel says to Joseph: “that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit”. (1:20) Of the Holy Spirit.

Therein lies the miracle and mystery that is Advent – Christmas. The angel’s words are what led the framers of the Apostles’ Creed to say: “I believe in Jesus Christ ... conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”

The miracle and mystery took place long before that night when a host of angels sang “Glory to God in the highest.” The miracle and mystery took place nine months earlier when the Spirit of God ‘overshadowed’ the virgin’s womb and without the contribution of a male’s sperm, Jesus was conceived.

Now, of all the claims made about Jesus of Nazareth, this one is one of the hardest for us modern and postmodern people to embrace. The extra-ordinary claim of Easter, that Jesus of Nazareth “rose again on the third day”, although hard to fit into our 21st century world-view, does not cause problems for us the way the extra-ordinary claim of Advent – Christmas does.

Thus many ask: “Must I believe in the Spirit conception, virgin birth of Jesus, in order to be His follower? Must one believe this miracle and mystery in order to be saved?”

The answer, of course, is “no”. In the tenth chapter of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul writes: “ ... if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.” (10:9) We can come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ without hearing or embracing the doctrine of the Spirit conception, virgin birth. We can enter into an intimate relationship with the risen, living Jesus without hearing or embracing this miracle and mystery.

But ... I would argue ... as we grow in relationship with Jesus ... as we mature in the life of discipleship ... we encounter questions and issues which can only be answered and resolved through Matthew’s claim about how the Savior of the world was conceived and born.

What helps is realizing that this miracle and mystery was hard for 1st century people to embrace. it did not fit a 1st century world-view either! As seen in Mary's and Joseph's initial reactions to the news that she would conceive. Mary: "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Joseph: "He decided to put her away."

Part of the beauty of the Advent – Christmas story is that the first skeptics end up "bowing before" the miracle and mystery. Mary trusts the angel's word, and says, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Joseph trusts the angel's word, and takes Mary home to be his wife. They both risk and put their weight on a message they cannot fully comprehend.

A number of objections are raised against Matthew's explanation of how Jesus, Immanuel, comes into the world. let me highlight three and briefly respond to each.

i. The first objection: If this affirmation/doctrine is important for a proper understanding of Jesus Christ, why is it not emphasized by other writers of the New Testament? Why are there no other references to the Spirit conception/virgin birth beyond the first chapters of Matthew and Luke? The fact that others do not mention it does not imply they do not believe it. Yes, if it is important for us to know about the Savior, why the silence?

My response is in the words of the German scholar Ethelbert Stauffer: "This silence is only apparent" (p.15) In his book, Jesus and His Story, Dr. Stauffer demonstrates that echoes of the miracle and mystery are heard throughout the New Testament and throughout the writings of Judaism.

For instance, Jesus is ridiculed as a "glutton and drunkard". (Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:34) In Palestine of that day "this particular insult would be flung at a person born of an illegitimate connection who betrayed, by his mode of life and his religious conduct, the stain of his birth." (p.16) In calling Jesus a "glutton and drunkard" the Pharisees were claiming that Jesus was an illegitimate child.

Another instance. Jesus' fellow citizens ask of him: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, and Joseph, and Judas, and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him." (Mark 6:3) Now in the first century the Jews had very strict rules for the giving of names. A Jewish man was always named after his father even if his father died before his birth. (p.16) Stauffer observes: a person "was named after his mother, only when the father was unknown". (p.16) "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Jesus' contemporaries knew of the irregularity of His birth and were intent to shame Him by calling Him Jeshua ben Miriam. "Son of Mary".

Another fact. After Jesus' death some rabbis made a great deal of the irregularity of His birth. In a genealogical table dating from A.D.70 Jesus is listed as "the bastard of a wedded wife". Some rabbis even bluntly call Mary "an adulteress". Some even claimed to know the name of the adulterer, the "unknown father" (Panthera). The Islamic tradition also refers to Jesus as "Son of Mary"; the Koran calls Him "Isa ibn Maryam". Again, an unusual way to refer to a man except when the father is unknown. (p.16)

So the fact is, the Spirit conception, virgin birth is not referred to only in the first chapter of Matthew and Luke. It is “recognized alike by Christ and Jews, friends and adversaries.” (ibid, 18).

ii. A second objection to the doctrine: Although Jesus is called “son of Mary”, He is also called “son of Joseph”. After the birth of Jesus, Luke speaks of Jesus’ “mother and father” taking Him to the Temple (2:27, 2:41, also 2:33). Luke records the question “is not this Joseph’s son?” (4:42) Matthew records the question “is not this the carpenter’s son?” (13:55) John records the question “is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” (6:42) None of the gospel writers seek to correct the statements. Jesus seeks to be treated as an ordinary son of Joseph.

My response to this objection is what Matthew himself notes. A key line of the story is the last (vs.25) “and he (Joseph) gave him (Mary’s son) the name Jesus”. “and he (Joseph) gave him (Mary’s son) the name Jesus”. In that act of naming, Joseph legally adopted Mary’s son. In that act of naming, Joseph was legitimizing her son. “By this act Jesus was admitted in a formal, legal sense to the house of David.” (Stauffer, p.18)

None of Sharon’s and my children came from our bodies; they are all adopted. Yet they are known as “children of Darrell and Sharon”. That people called the Spirit conceived, virgin-born son of Mary, “son of Joseph” is testimony to Joseph’s love and obedience. He accepted the angel’s explanation of Mary’s pregnancy. He obeyed the command to be the one who did the naming. He adopted Mary’s child as his own. And like any other adoptive father, Joseph proudly introduced his adopted son as “my son”.

iii. A third objection raised against the Spirit conception, virgin birth is theological. It is argued that if Jesus is virgin-conceived then Jesus cannot really be one of us (as the Gospels clearly show). It is argued that if Jesus did not have a human father then He cannot be fully human. It is argued that if Jesus did not have a human father then He cannot be fully human.

My response is to ask why? Why does the different way Jesus entered the world mean he is therefore not fully human? Go back to the first humans, to Adam and Eve. Did they come into the world in the way the rest of us did? No. Does that make them less than fully human. No. Dale Bruner puts it so well: “... if the first Adam was without human parents and yet is truly human, why cannot the last Adam be without a human parent and be truly human?” (Christbook, p. 34) The Son of Mary is fully human. It is just that He is not merely human. For He is in the most literal sense of the word all that His Names imply: He is Immanuel, the –with-us God; He is Yeshua, Yahweh-come-to-the-rescue.

“I believe in Jesus Christ ... conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary”.

The question is, “so what?” What difference does it make if you and I, like Mary and Joseph “bow before” the miracle and mystery?

(1) Well, first of all, when I embrace this “conceived by the Holy Spirit” I realize that in Jesus of Nazareth we are dealing with a new creation!! This is a new happening in the history of the

human race, a new beginning for the human race. Matthew's reference to the Holy Spirit working in the womb of Mary would have taken Jewish minds back to the opening verses of the Bible (to Genesis 1:1-2). There the Spirit of God "hovers over" the void of nothingness ... and out of that void brings forth the first creation. In the Advent – Christmas event the same Spirit "overshadows" (Luke 1:35) the void of the Virgin's womb ... and out of that void brings forth the new creation. The conception of Jesus Christ is an act of God "as unique and unprecedented as the initial creation itself". (Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, p.53)

Which is why our scientific world-view cannot finally analyze the miracle. We are dealing with something brand new; there is no precedent against which to compare it. It is not a "natural" phenomenon, so cannot be understood in purely naturalistic terms. Jesus Christ is unique, totally unique. In a class all by Himself! There is no one else like Him!

(2) Second, when I embrace this "conceived by the Holy Spirit" I no longer have to guess when the new creation came into being. I no longer need to guess when Divinity and humanity were forever joined. Was Divinity granted to Jesus when God raised Him from the dead, as some guess? Did the Divine unite with the human when Jesus was baptized in the river, as others guess? Did the man Jesus somehow gradually evolve into unity with the Divine, as still others guess? "Conceived by the Holy Spirit". It was in Mary's womb that Immanuel, God-with-us, the God-Man came into being. In the womb!

What an incredible wonder! The Living God became an adult male. And before that a little boy And before that a helpless infant. And before that a tiny fetus ... And before that, an ovum!! It was there, in the womb, that new life for the world began. It was there that God and humanity became one ... forever.

(3) Third, when I embrace this "conceived by the Holy Spirit" I understand the primary work of God's Spirit in the world. The Spirit keeps on conceiving ... keeps on conceiving the new creation in the bodies of the old creation. The Spirit keeps on begetting Jesus Christ in human beings.

Maybe that is a slightly risky way to put it ... but it gets at the wonder. The Holy Spirit delights to conceive ... to give birth to the life of Jesus in human beings. John R. W. Stott of England puts it this way: "... Christians have recognized that Mary's experience, which in one way was absolutely unique, in another is typical of the experience of every Christian believer." (Psalms & Canticles, p.44) Growing, developing, forming in Mary's womb was the human body of the Incarnate God. No one will ever experience that phenomenon. But here is the wonder! the same life, the same unique, un-generated, eternal life, that dwelt in the body of Mary's Son, dwells in all who love Him!

Is that not what it means to be a Christian, a Christ-in-one? To be a Christian does not simply mean following the teachings of Jesus. To be a Christian does not simply mean trying to live by Jesus' Kingdom principles. To be a Christian means having Jesus take up residence in us! "Abide in me, and I in you", says Jesus. In. The apostle Paul uses the phrase, "Christ in you, the hope of glory". (Colossians 1:27) In. He prays for the Ephesians, that "Christ may dwell in your hearts". (Ephesians 3:16) In. The same life gestating in Mary's womb now dwells in us!

Paul articulates it most boldly in his letter to the Galatians. In the same chapter where he declares “When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (4:4), he speaks of the Galatians as, “my children, with whom I am in labor until Christ is formed in you” (4:19). The apostle uses the language of conception, pregnancy and birth to describe the Christian experience.

Dare I put it this way? A Christian is a person who is impregnated with the very life of Jesus! The life which animated the flesh of the Baby in Mary’s womb, now lives in and animates those who belong to Him. The Holy Spirit, by whom Jesus was conceived, in the virgin’s womb, causes Jesus to be “birthed” in our flesh, re-producing the character of Jesus in us.

(4) Fourth, when I embrace this “conceived by the Holy Spirit” I can maintain the proper perspective on Christian life and ministry. You see, although Jesus, the New Creation, comes through our humanity, for our humanity, He is not produced by our humanity. Let me say that again. Although Jesus Christ comes through our humanity, for our humanity, He is not produced by our humanity. Yes, in saving the world the Living God employs a human agent; God chooses Mary to be a partner in the work of salvation. But in the final analysis it is God and God alone who saves the world. “Joseph, that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” ... that is, it is not from you, it is not from any human. The new creation comes from outside the old, to do for the old what the old cannot do for itself. We are not our own Savior. We cannot save the world. Only God can. And in the Spirit conception of Jesus begins to do just that.

The story of the virgin birth confirms what God has said over and over again, especially through the prophets. “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.” (Zechariah 4:6) The work of redeeming and re-creating the world is the Spirit’s work ... from beginning to end. Nowhere in Scripture are we exhorted to pull up our boot straps and change ourselves. But everywhere we are exhorted to open up to and co-operate with the power of the re-creating Spirit. Life in the new creation is life in and by the Spirit, from beginning to end.

(5) Fifth, when I embrace this “conceived by the Holy Spirit”, the word “impossible” drops from my vocabulary. In the Advent – Christian miracle the impossible happened! That which we say cannot happen, did! Jesus Christ is the impossible made possible; He is the impossible made actual.

Which is to say in relationship with Mary’s Son there is always hope ... and therefore, joy. None of us has to remain as we are ... we can be changed ... when the Spirit who came upon Mary comes upon us. No society has to remain as it is ... it can be changed. When the Spirit who came upon Mary comes upon our city. Nothing is impossible for the Spirit who conceived the Savior into our world.

*“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie,
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by.
Yes in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light,*

*The hopes and fears of all the years,
Are met in thee tonight.”*

What are your fears today? Will you bring them to the virgin’s Son? What are your hopes today?
Will you bring them to where the impossible happens?

“I believe in Jesus Christ ... conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”