

Why the Virgin Birth is not the Biggest Shock

A sermon on Matthew 1:18-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 December 2022

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Message

God comes to us in unexpected ways, and the break with conventional religious respectability is even more earth-shattering than the break with conventional reproductive biology.

Sermon

Ask most people what they know about the birth of Jesus, and most of what you will hear about is the stuff you can learn from the pictures on Christmas cards – a baby in a manger in a stable, shepherds, angels, a star, and kings on camels with strange gifts. Ask about what happened before that, about the conception and pregnancy, and you might hear about a pregnant woman making an interstate trip on a donkey, but most likely you are going to hear that Mary was a virgin, and that Jesus was, as the Creed puts it, “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.”

This is taught explicitly in two out of the four gospels; the other two don’t contain birth stories at all. In the gospel according to Luke, we hear the story from Mary’s perspective in the well known annunciation story where the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and explains to her that by the power of the Holy Spirit, the saviour of the world is going to be conceived in her womb, and Mary agrees to go along with the plan.

The version we heard tonight was from Matthew’s account, and he tells the story from Joseph’s perspective. If you were to listen to a great many Christians who seem to think that the virgin birth is important mainly as a kind of faith-challenge, a miracle story that you have to believe in to be accepted by God, then telling the story from Joseph’s perspective may seem like a strange thing to do, because really, this is not his story, is it? I mean, no doubt Joseph had had every intention of being an active party to any and all conceptions that happened in Mary’s womb, but with this first one, he kind of got left out, didn’t he?

So maybe Matthew’s choice to tell the story from Joseph’s perspective is calling our attention to things other than just the biological miracle; things you probably won’t hear about from people who learned the stories from their Christmas cards.

But before I get to what those things might be, let me offer a few comments on the biological miracle bit, if for no other reason than that I don’t want to be accused of dodging the question.

I don’t have to cross my fingers behind my back as we sing that line of the Creed that says that we believe that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.” Is it a literal historical biological fact? I don’t know. Nobody does, however strongly they may believe in it. Such things can only ever be taken on faith, because they can’t be verified. That’s true of all historical facts. Like in 12 days time, Jill is going to be celebrating a birthday, but if it was seriously questioned, nobody could prove that she was born when she thinks she was. If some conspiracy theorist started arguing that birth certificates and hospital records couldn’t be trusted, there is no other way to prove it, is there?

Nowadays, it would be possible to scientifically prove who Jill's father was, but for Jesus's birth nearly two thousand years before DNA testing, no such evidence is available. Those of us who believe that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary" do so on the evidence of these two gospel accounts alone. I'm not one who thinks that the Bible is a history book, and that everything in it has to be believed as literal history. And frankly, if it could somehow be proved to me that Jesus was actually conceived by Joseph, or even by a Roman soldier who raped Mary, as often happens when foreign troops occupy a country, it would make very little difference to my faith.

However, theologically I believe that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary." That is to say that I believe that that means something important and true, and whether the story is a symbol of that truth or also a literal historical truth is of far less importance than the theological truth itself. I could even say that I believe the theological truth so strongly that I can't be bothered questioning the historical reality of it, let alone going to all the effort of disbelieving it!

That particular theological truth is not what I want to focus on tonight, though, so if you're very curious about it, I'm sorry but you'll have to make do with this two or three sentence summary.

It seems to me that we humans are so unavoidably entangled in destructive patterns of rivalry, grudges, retaliation cycles, and cravings to prove ourselves better than one another, that it is probably wired into our biology, written into our DNA. And if that's the case, then any rescue mission from God probably requires an intervention that even goes to the level of human biology. So if God is breaking into our human life and experience in a way that promises hope of real change, of an end to our conventional toxic business-as-usual, then it makes perfect sense to me that such an intervention would even need to start with an interruption to conventional biology-as-usual. So I believe that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary."

But Matthew's account which we heard read tonight tells the story from the perspective of Joseph, someone whose only involvement in the conception was to be understandably miffed by it, so even though the virgin conception is mentioned, it is not the main point; it is just a piece of background to help set up the main points.

By way of introducing something that is much more important to Matthew, let me begin with an observation about what we are going to be doing straight after this sermon, and about the people at the centre of it. We are going to be doing one of our occasional rites of blessing the children. Unfortunately, due to lack of organisation on my part, those rites have been even more occasional than they should have been over the past three years. But anyway, we are hopefully getting back on track tonight.

The children involved represent three different families. Family has become something of an idolatry in many sectors of the church. The idea of "family values" has come to be thought of as synonymous with "Christian values", despite the things that Jesus actually said about family making him anything but an advocate for the modern concept of traditional family values. In many of these churches, the idolising of family has a very narrow ideology to it, and so it idolises only a certain kind of family – a family in which the children are conceived

and raised by two heterosexual, cis-gendered parents who married each other more than nine months before the birth of the first child and are still married to each other.

But when we do our blessing of the children in a few minutes, only one of the three families involved conforms to that picture. Even if you still want to defend that picture as some kind of norm, in our congregation it is not even a majority. And since the other two differ from it in entirely different ways, no one gets to be a majority!

There are some churches, fortunately not too many, where some of these children might not be welcomed at all. There are a lot of churches where they would be welcomed, but on condition that the nature of their families was swept under the carpet and kept quiet. Because there would be respectable religious people who would see their families as somehow falling outside of the love of God and unworthy to be in church.

Which brings me back to Matthew's account of Joseph finding out that Mary was pregnant with somebody else's baby. Because, you see, Joseph seems to have been one of those sorts of religious people who wouldn't stand for this sort of thing. At least, I think that is what Matthew is saying.

It is not one hundred percent clear. In verse 19, Matthew says two things about Joseph – that he is a righteous man, and that he was reluctant to expose Mary to public disgrace so he planned to break off their engagement quietly. And those two things are linked to each other, but the Greek sentence is ambiguous. It could mean that because he was a righteous man, he was reluctant to publicly shame her, or it could mean that despite being a righteous man, he was reluctant to shame her. You get quite a different feel for what sort of person Joseph was depending on which way you read that verse. But the second one is probably more likely in the context of a first century Jewish understanding of righteousness.

Their concept of righteousness was all about commitment to the law, to the fulfilling of the law. Saying he was a righteous man is like saying he was a staunch advocate of religious respectability and a stickler for the law. So Matthew is probably saying that Joseph's reluctance to shame Mary comes as a bit of a surprise from such a naturally conservative, hard line morality man. A welcome surprise, but nevertheless a surprise.

And reading it that way follows on naturally from what comes immediately before this story too, because right from the get-go, Matthew seems to be directing much of his gospel account to challenging the thinking of the respectable hard line morality types. So in the lead up to this story, Matthew has given us Jesus's family tree, listing 42 fathers of fathers of fathers, and he interrupts the pattern just five times to draw attention to a mother. Mary is the fifth one, but all five of them have some sort of sexual scandal hanging over their heads. In those hard line respectable morality churches, these are the five names you'd sweep under the carpet, not the names you'd highlight.

So Matthew highlights the first four of them, reminding people that God welcomed them into the story of the unfolding salvation of the world, and then moves into this story of Joseph struggling to reconcile his conservative commitment to the law and its conventional morality, and this news that God wanted him to go ahead and trash his own reputation by marrying a woman who was already pregnant, and "as if" the neighbours were going to believe that she was still a virgin.

So the emphasis in this story falls not so much on the biological miracle idea, but on the social significance of how these people were going to be seen by the religious conservatives in their community, and on what that means for understanding what God is on about. When you realise that this story is the final piece of that genealogy, which has already scandalised the hard line traditional family values types, then it becomes clear how relevant this story is to what we are about to do here in blessing these children.

Because, in faithfulness to the stories of Jesus as told by Matthew, we too are refusing to sweep the stories of these families under the carpet. We too are, like Matthew, saying that however much respectable conventional religious types might like to imagine that they have some kind of monopoly on God's love and on being used in God's purposes, the truth is almost the opposite. The truth is that not only does God love and welcome these families and call us to do the same, but that right the way through salvation history, God can be seen over and over calling, equipping and partnering with exactly the kinds of people who the religious types thought were beyond the pale.

So I'm going to shut up now, and we're going to sing the Creed and then get on with celebrating and blessing these children and their families whose very diversity makes them a picture of the gracious culture of God.