



Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
December 22, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A priest was walking down the street one day when a young man ran up to him and said, “Father, Father, I’m not a Christian but I want to be one and I’m ready to be baptized. Can we go to the church and you’ll baptize me right now?” Of course the priest was reluctant and he said, “son, there are some things you have to know before you can be baptized, let’s set up an appointment at my office and talk more about it.”

But the young man was insistent that he was ready and he said “really, I’m ready, ask me anything about the faith I’m sure I can answer it.” So the priest said, “okay, tell me where Jesus was born.” The young man said, “that’s an easy one – it was Philadelphia!” The priest just shook his head. “Oh, I know,” the young man said, “he was born in Pittsburgh!”

“Pittsburgh?!” the priest replied, “son, you’ve got a lot to learn. Jesus was born in Bethlehem.” And the young man said “dang it, I knew it was somewhere in Pennsylvania!”

That little story comes courtesy of Don, he told it at the men’s breakfast a few weeks ago and I just slipped it into my pocket until we got a little closer to Christmas. And now the day is almost upon us and the time comes once again to tell the story we have heard so many times before – the story of how God entered into the creation and became one of us in order to reveal himself to us. Matthew’s account of the story, which we hear this morning, is a bit different than the more familiar account that we know from Luke. We will hear Luke’s version of the story on Christmas Eve, just two days from now, but for this Fourth Sunday of Advent we pause to hear how Matthew tells the story.

Matthew, as you’ll notice, focuses on Joseph rather than Mary and in his account it is Joseph who receives a message from an angel. Matthew’s account is also much shorter and omits the shepherds, angelic choirs from heaven, and the stable.

What I'd like to take notice of this morning, though, is something that both versions of the story have in common: they both say that Mary was a Virgin and that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is, of course, the most difficult part of the story for us. It invites us to believe something that is so miraculous that it is outside of anything like our normal experience of life. And by the way, we shouldn't think that the struggle to accept this aspect of the story is merely the result of a modern, scientific worldview. Ancient people like Matthew and Luke, and the people who first read their gospels, understood very well what actions it took to bring a child into the world. In fact, they may have had a more immediate awareness of it than we do, since most people lived their whole lives in the confined spaces of small one and two room homes with little privacy. They were as aware as we are that a Virgin birth is a miracle far outside our normal experience of life.

But they believed that it was a vitally important part of the story. So important, in fact, that they included it in both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed – the two most important summaries of the most important aspects of our faith. If you spend some time reading through the writings of the early Christians something becomes clear quite early in your reading: the idea of the Virgin birth is not about Mary it's about Jesus. The early Christians emphasized the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth because they believed that Jesus was the Son of God in the flesh, God living as a human being. So, when they wrote the phrase into the Creed that says "by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man" they were preserving their understanding of how it was that the divine Son became flesh and blood as the man Jesus.

I find it interesting that the idea that Jesus was God in the flesh, made incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, was almost universally believed by the early Christians even if they disagreed on lots of other subjects. For example, you may know that the Nicene Creed was written as the result of fierce disagreement that raged in Christianity during the 300s. The Creed was first written down at a gathering of Bishops from all over the ancient world in 325. Christians spent the next 55 years debating its language before a whole new generation of Bishops from all over the ancient world came together in 381 and affirmed that it was the best summary they could come up with of what Christians believe.

The debate that produced the Nicene Creed was not a debate over whether Jesus was the Son of God in the flesh – every side believed that. Historians have identified at least 5 different sides in the debate and they were all agreed that Jesus was the Son of God in the flesh. What they were debating was actually what it

means to say that God has a Son. For example, they debated whether the Son was fully God in every way or whether he was someone God had created to embody the characteristics of God, but they still all agreed that the Son existed before the universe was created and that he had become flesh and blood, born of the Virgin Mary, and lived his life among us as the man Jesus of Nazareth.

The longer I study this story and think about the debates it has created among Christians the more I am convinced that the Virgin birth is not, actually, the most difficult part of the story. That's why I've brought up the fact that the disagreements that produced the Creed were not about the Virgin birth. The deeper challenge of the story of Jesus is to believe that God is, by nature, a loving communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, and not just some distant and impersonal force. The deeper challenge of the story is to believe that the loving communion of God took notice of all of us and loved us enough to enter into our brokenness and suffering as a human being like us. And even deeper still is the challenge to believe that, through Jesus, the communion of God has opened to welcome us into God's own life.

In other words, the challenge is to believe that God has become one with us and we have become one with God. If I can believe that, then how it happened – by a Virgin being found to be with child from the Holy Spirit – is actually one of the least unbelievable things about it. If I can believe that God loves me enough to share with me in the pain and struggle of this life then I am not too hard pressed to believe that this same loving God can enter into this world in a miraculous and unexpected way.

Christmas, then, is an invitation to believe in God's love for us. It is an invitation to believe that God wants us and wants to always be God with us. It is an invitation to look beyond what we assume to be possible and to believe that God's love is greater than we could have ever imagined. May we be given the grace to believe.

Amen.

