

The Apostles' Creed

Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary

February 19, 2023—Sermon Discussion Guide

In our age of technology it is hard to accept the mystical, magical, and miraculous. We are always looking for the man behind the curtain, the smoke and mirrors, the scientific explanation. It is hard to believe in miracles.

But that is what is expected of faith. Belief in things we cannot see, understand, and explain. There are always things that science and magic tricks cannot explain. There are always situations and happenings that require belief.

- Have you ever witnessed something that to you was miraculous and could not be explained away? Describe.



Jesus' birth and resurrection are the two foundational miracles of the Christian faith. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and most Protestant denominations believe in these two miracles. And according to religious experts, even Muslims believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

Conceived

What does conceived by the Holy Ghost mean?

Read Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25.

Let's look at the meanings of some of the words used in Luke and Matthew. If you look in an English dictionary, the word "conceive" means to imagine something new, originate or begin something, as well as become pregnant with. And isn't that what God did? He imagined something new—himself being born as a new human baby. He originated the idea of the Word becoming flesh in that way.

In Greek, the word for conceive is *sullambano*. Besides conceive, this word is also used for helping or catching something. The Holy Spirit helped in the conception and Mary's womb caught the seed of

the Spirit. It seems to fit. In Matthew 1:20, Joseph is told that the child is conceived (begotten) by the Holy Spirit. The Greek word here is different from the word used in Luke. It is the word *gennao* which means to procreate, beget, make, or bring forth.

In Luke 1:35, the word overshadowed (Greek: *episkiazo*) is used. This word can mean to cast a shade upon, to envelop in a haze of brilliance, to invest with preternatural (outside of nature, supernatural) influence. Luke used that word for a reason—to give us a picture.

Just imagine the scene of the Angel Gabriel with Mary. The angel is so bright that Mary is cast in shade. Then the Holy Spirit comes upon her and she is enveloped in a haze of brilliance. And within that haze a miracle occurs. Her egg is supernaturally fertilized to become the embryo of Baby Jesus. WOW!

- What is the significance of “conceived by the Holy Spirit” to you?
- Why do you think God felt it necessary to send Jesus as a baby instead of a full grown man?
- How do you imagine the moment of Mary being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit?

Personal study: We learned in a previous lesson that the word used for Holy Spirit means breath. Try to describe for yourself how the presence of the Holy Spirit might have felt to Mary.

Virgin

Read Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25 again.

It is said by scholars that Luke got the story directly from Mary herself. (See Luke 1:1-4 and 2:51) Let's see what Mary says about her circumstances. In Luke 1:28, the word translated as virgin is *parthenos* in Greek. This word describes a maiden or unmarried daughter who is assumed to be a virgin. In Luke 1:34 where Mary is speaking, the original Greek literally translates as “since a man not I know.” The word used for not is *ou*. This is a powerful word because it indicates an absolute NO—an emphatic never, none, no way! Mary is making it very clear that she has never “been” with a man.

- How are the cultural norms of that society important for understanding these verses?
- Why is it so difficult for some people to believe in Mary's virginity? How would you explain it in your own words to an unbeliever?
- Why is Mary's virginity necessary for Jesus' birth and life to be a miracle?
- J. I. Packer states that if “we deny the Virgin birth because it was a miracle, we should in logic deny Jesus' bodily resurrection, too. These miracles are on a par, and it is unreasonable to accept either while rejecting the other!” Explain in your own words the connection between the two miracles.

Personal study: What connection does Isaiah 7:14 have with Mary's story? How does that make you feel about the virgin birth?

My take away: This week, imagine Mary telling you these intimate details about her encounter with the angel and the miraculous conception of Jesus. How would you feel in Luke's place? Pray asking God to help you embrace miracles.