

3rd Sunday in Lent

24th March 2019

Isaiah 7:14

Matthew 1:18

Luke 1:26-31, 34-35

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt

Theotokos

Tomorrow is March 25, exactly 9 months before Christmas.

And incidentally, for those keeping track, you now have exactly 276 days left to pick out my Christmas present. On the church calendar, it's called the Feast of the Annunciation, and supposedly commemorates the day that the angel Gabriel visited Mary, told her she would give birth, and then somehow miraculously impregnated her with Jesus.

For a month or so, now, and for several more weeks to come, I've been trying to offer some of my thoughts

on the evolution of Christianity--ideas that are a core part of the Christian tradition, but that I also think need to evolve and leave room for new ways of understanding as we think about what Christianity is becoming in this time of the death and rebirth of the Church as we have known it. Two weeks ago, I talked about my own understanding of God, and you can see in your bulletins a tentative schedule for some of the other topics I'm planning to explore.

But before I offer my thoughts on today's topic, I

do want to offer a disclaimer. And this applies not just to today's topic, but to all of my sermons really. When I stand up here to offer a sermon, I am offering my own thoughts and reflections on topics that I find of interest or importance, and hope they're things you find worthy of consideration as well. But I don't ever profess to have this stuff figured out. My hope is that whatever I can offer in a sermon is a way of sharing my own thought process, of inviting you along on my own journey with the hope that something in that may provoke your own thinking or reflection. But please don't take anything I say to ever suggest that you have to agree with me or else I think you're wrong. I always welcome conversation on anything I say on Sunday, but whether or not we talk about it, I always hope that I offer ideas in such a way

that it leaves room for differences of opinion and mutual respect.

I grew up Presbyterian, and the Sunday church services that I remember were pretty predictable. We always had a responsive call to worship, we sang three hymns, we always had a pastoral prayer that felt like it went on way too long, so I would sort of doze off listening for those familiar words that meant it was almost over when the pastor would say, "as Jesus taught us, praying together...Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." We would always sing the Doxology after the offering, and it wasn't the fun, 'dancy' version that we sing, either. But it did mean that church was almost over, so that part was good. And we always, always, said the Apostles' Creed every Sunday. "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 Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” We skipped the “descended into hell” part, but my grandparents’ church did not. And boy did that raise some questions for me the first time I picked up on the difference.

But I liked saying the Apostles’ Creed. I still do like it, honestly, but not because it is necessarily the best expression of my own personal understanding of Christianity. I like it because it’s something that we can share in common with Christians across boundaries of denomination and time. It’s shared by Roman Catholics, Eastern Christianity, many different Protestant denominations, and has

been that way for nearly 1700 years. For all those reasons, I like the Apostles’ Creed.

But there was a period in my ministry when I had a really difficult time bringing myself to say it. But looking back, that period was the start of my own kind of personal transition from what I’ll call an historically orthodox understanding of the faith to that kind of Second Naivete, as Paul Ricour puts it, of seeking new understanding within the old traditions. And that transition started with my admission to a trusted friend and colleague that I had a hard time with the Apostles’ Creed because I wasn’t sure I really believed in a virgin birth.

Now, as far as we can tell, the earliest Christians didn’t seem to care at all about how Jesus was born. They certainly didn’t seem

to think there was anything special or unusual about it. Paul, the earliest New Testament writer, never mentions a word about Jesus' birth other than to refer to him as the seed of David. Neither does Mark, the earliest gospel writer, mention a virgin birth. It's not until Matthew and Luke, probably written around 85 CE or so at the earliest, that we have any mention of Jesus' birth. But then other late gospels, like John and Thomas, also don't mention a virgin birth. John even refers to Jesus as the son of Joseph the carpenter.

As you might know, Matthew and Luke likely borrowed the idea of a virgin birth from other traditions around them at the time. There are abundant examples of virgin birth stories in classical mythology and in other cultures around the world. Luke and Matthew both borrow a verse from

Isaiah, which we also read this morning, to support their claim of Mary's virginity at the time of Jesus' conception. But as you can see, the Isaiah verse doesn't actually use a word meaning "virgin." Isaiah uses the Hebrew word "Almah" which simply means a young woman of childbearing age without implying anything about her previous sexual experience one way or the other.

But why was it so important to Matthew and Luke, and later on, to the church, to claim that Mary was a virgin impregnated by the Holy Spirit? Is that a critical claim to make for understanding who Jesus was? It didn't seem to be for Mark or for Paul.

But virginity, at least among women, carried a venerated status in many cultures. Indeed it still does today for many traditions.

But even up until the Middle Ages, many held a belief that female virginity carried with it some cultic powers. The *Bestiary*, a twelfth century CE text written by Philip de Thaun, talks about how a unicorn, called a monoceros for ‘single horn,’ could only be attracted by a virgin. And not just a virgin freely roaming through the forest, either. She had to be tied up to a tree so that the timid unicorn could approach her and seek a kiss, causing the unicorn to fall asleep on the virgin’s breast, whereupon the hunter came and killed it in its sleep. But if the unicorn determined that the bound woman wasn’t really a virgin, he would stab her with his horn, killing her, and then flee before the hunter arrived. Rome had its own legends about the Vestal Virgins who had the ability to prophesy as long as they preserved their chastity. So

even though the earliest Christians didn’t seem to care about how or to whom Jesus was born, it’s easy to see how later writers drew an idea of Jesus being born under some kind of special circumstances.

And yet, even in an age of biological understanding, the idea that Mary was a virgin persists quite strongly among many Christians. I suspect part of that is this lingering idea that sex is bad and dirty and sinful, and that if you do it, you’re going to hell. A friend of mine love to remark that, “The church teaches that sex is dirty, bad, bestial, sinful and gross, leading those who do it into hell. So you should save it for your true love.”

Yet for me, and I know for at least some of you as well, the idea that anyone, including Jesus, could somehow be conceived without

Mary having sex with someone, raises some pretty interesting questions. Like what would Jesus' DNA look like? Where did he get his Y-chromosome from? Or was there still a sperm involved that just entered Mary's Fallopian tube, and if so, God having sperm seems to make the God of the whole vast universe unequivocally male and bound to reproduce in a way remarkably similar to the way life on earth evolved to do.

Even setting aside modern scientific questions, I still had a hard time reconciling a virgin birth with the Jesus we meet in the gospels. Because the whole of the Jesus narratives is about tearing down the walls, the divisions, between the sacred and the profane, between the pure and the impure. The gospels have Jesus born in a barn among livestock. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus

includes Tamar, a victim of rape, and Rahab, a prostitute. Jesus was continually criticized for his ministry to lepers and prostitutes and foreigners and the ritually impure, even opting to begin his ministry with a baptism by a religious outsider in the wilderness, not within the temple system.

In Christianity, purity is abolished. This is the central insight of Christianity: that in the person of Jesus, there is no contradiction between being fully human and fully divine. Or, in other words, God is perfectly at home in a human life, with all its ritualistic mess. There is no shame in the constituent elements of our humanity, including the manner in which we are made. Which is why the "pure virgin" tradition runs totally against the grain. The problem is not just basic biology: it doesn't add up theologically.

The rationale I hear most often when this topic comes up is that if Jesus wasn't conceived without sex, then he is no different, no more special than any of us. That's going to be a sermon topic for next week, but at least to me, a virgin birth is not what makes Jesus special at all. Rather, he was willing to do something incredibly dangerous; he stood up to power, especially corrupt power, to talk of love, of courage, of faith, of social justice, of the poor being fed and the oppressed being set free. He did this knowing full well that he might be killed for it. And he was right.

So as we think about the evolution of Christianity, is there room to think about other ways that God might be conceived within us? The prologue for John's gospel makes this wonderful claim that to all who welcomed

Jesus, who believed in what he was doing in the world, to them God gave the power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of a human, but of God. To all those who take up the ministry of Jesus, the ministry of breaking down walls between people and groups, the ministry of eating and celebrating with outsiders, the ministry of co-creating the kingdom of heaven here on earth, to all those people God has given the power to be born anew, and John very intentionally chooses to use language to talk about that birth that has nothing to do with biological reproduction. John is already talking about a "virgin" birth as something that happens within each of us, not as a biological claim, but a spiritual one. Three chapters later, Jesus has this very same discussion with Nico-

demus who keeps trying to understand this new birth as something literal, while Jesus keeps trying to show him that it's not.

I've noted this before, and you'll hear me say it again I'm sure...I find a lot less meaning in the biblical stories if they can only describe something that happened one time thousands of years ago. But if instead they are continually inviting us to new ways of understanding, of new ways of experienc-

ing God breaking into the world, of the spirit of God being born anew within us, filling us with the power to make a positive difference in the world just as Jesus and those who followed his path did, well, then those stories have something to teach me, new understanding to impart, and new life to give.