



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

**The 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY of ADVENT**  
**DECEMBER 18, 2022**

A Homily by the Rev. Jo P. Popham "The wild hope of Christmas" Matthew 1:18-25

Let's talk about the virgin birth. Mark, the earliest of the evangelists makes no mention of Mary being a virgin, nor does Paul who wrote even earlier. In the Gospel according to Luke an angel came to a "virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary."<sup>1</sup> And in the Gospel according to Matthew we hear: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way... before Joseph and his intended had lived together, Mary was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." So that must be the gospel truth; Mary was a virgin. Right? The Gospel according to John, though not one of the synoptic Gospels, spoke of Jesus being born "not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God."<sup>2</sup> John differs from the three synoptic gospels dramatically. The birth narrative is told very much the same in the three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John, on the other hand tells Jesus's story from a spiritual perspective.

In the Gospel according to Matthew we hear about the birth of Jesus from a man's viewpoint. It is natural that Joseph would be all important to the hearers of this part of the Gospel. In the first century Matthew's audience was Jewish Christians. So, speaking of the virgin birth would have been a fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures, particularly the Prophets who spoke of the Messiah being born of a virgin: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, 'God is with us.' " Straight from the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>3</sup> The Messiah was to be of the House of David. Prophets spoke of the Messiah to come sitting upon the throne of David to establish justice in God's kingdom<sup>4</sup>; Jeremiah prophesied of a branch of David being raised up<sup>5</sup>; and Samuel spoke of David's heir sitting on the throne of the house of Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Matthew gave us the genealogy of our Lord, tracing his line all the way back – 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus. Matthew recalls the details: "So all the generations

from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations...”.<sup>7</sup> In the patriarchal society of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jesus’s lineage would be traced, of course, through Joseph. The expectation of the Messiah being descended from the House of David appears to be fulfilled if Joseph were the father of Jesus. In the ancient Jewish tradition lineage was traced through the men. Later when it was accepted that the mother contributed more than just being a vessel for a child and since it could be absolutely established who the mother of a child was, only then did the practice of lineage through the mother become common place. In the case of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Jesus would have been known to be descended from Aaron, since we know that she was related to Elizabeth who was from the house of Levi. But as the Gospel story tells us, Joseph did take Mary as his wife and adopted Jesus as his own, thus becoming his earthly father who was indeed of the House of David. And so Jesus was directly descended from both Abraham and King David, making Him a legal heir to the throne of Israel.

Joseph was a man of exceptional character. Matthew pictured Joseph as a righteous, compassionate, and obedient person. When Joseph was faced with the pregnancy of his betrothed, his beloved, he alone knew that he was not the baby’s father. He considered her legally his wife. And yet she had had an affair with someone else. Unless she had been raped – and she had not said this was so – the only conclusion Joseph could reach was that she had been unfaithful. Mary was an adulteress. And the penalty for adultery was stoning.<sup>8</sup>

Mosaic law prescribed exactly how to deal with this situation:

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph rightly feared for Mary if her pregnancy were discovered. If her adultery were discovered he could not marry her, nor could her paramour. There would be a messy trial.

But Joseph as a righteous man “did not want to expose her to public disgrace” so he thought that he would “divorce her quietly.” He would marry her, yes, that’s what he would do. And he would divorce her because the baby was not his. All he had to do was write out a certificate of divorce and give it to her in the presence of two male witnesses as the law required. Yes, that is just what he would do. That way he would avoid accusing her of adultery. He would protect Mary as much as he could. He would do the right thing.

Now this was when the grace of God came into play. God sent an angel who came to him in a dream and said: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”<sup>10</sup>

Joseph took God’s message as truth. Is this the truth? Is the Virgin conception historically correct? Since the Great Enlightenment people have debated this question. If we lived before the Enlightenment, we might believe the Bible to be inerrant, we might rely on *sola scriptura*, on Scripture alone, and the Virgin birth would not be in question. But we live far past modern times, past post-modern times, I would venture to say, we who live in the information age when we question authority, we need not rely on Scripture alone. Or do we? We live in a time of emergence where the question is “where now is our authority?” As Anglicans we rely on Scripture, reason, and tradition. We are truly blessed for we can allow Scripture to be interpreted using reason and tradition. What is really in question when we look hard at the Virgin birth is where authority lies. If the authority of the Bible is in question – and it seems to be in question every time a seeker or a skeptic wants to know about the Virgin birth – then we must look to the truth of the matter.

Phyllis Tickle was a licensed lay reader and lay Eucharistic minister in the Episcopal Church and an extraordinary speaker, poet, and author of all things spiritual and religious. She tells the story of a young man, a very young Christian who sat in the back of the room where a seasoned mature Christian was telling the story of Jesus’s birth. An

argument erupted over the topic of the Virgin conception. The young man was hearing about Jesus's birth – the infancy narrative – for the very first time. Others in the room were puzzled about how such a learned theologian as their priest could believe the ridiculous set of circumstances that led to the Messiah's birth. How could this be believable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they asked? The young man in the back far corner stood up and said with confidence: "The Virgin birth is so beautiful that it has to be true, whether it happened or not."<sup>11</sup> My friends, the virgin birth narrative IS too beautiful not to be true.

Fred Buechner brought such clarity to the understanding of the virgin birth. Yes, "many Christians have made it an article of faith that it was the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph who got Mary pregnant. If [we] believe God was somehow in Christ, it shouldn't make much difference to [us] how he got there. If [we] don't believe, it should make even less difference... In either case, life is complicated enough without confusing theology and gynecology."<sup>12</sup> Amen to that!

Let us consider that the real hope of the Gospel (of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is not so much about the Virgin Mary birthing a child, but our allowing Jesus to be born in us, again and again. What if the real question is not whether Mary was a virgin or not, but if we can hold on to the hope that Jesus will come into our hearts again this year. Buechner said: "What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year... is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us."<sup>13</sup>

My friends, I trust – I believe – that the Virgin birth is true. Truth need not be factually accurate. I believe the Virgin birth because it is Scriptural and, yes, because it is our tradition, and, yes, because I can reason that it is true because it is too beautiful not to be true, and because "God is with us." It is the wild hope of Christmas that Jesus is born in us, that he comes to us again this year and year after year, moment after moment, just as the angel promised Joseph.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:27.

<sup>2</sup> John 1:13.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 9:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 23:5.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Samuel 7:16.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 1:17.

<sup>8</sup> Mary's prospects were grim. She had agreed to the pregnancy, but now the cost of that decision had become painfully apparent. She was at considerable risk in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Joseph would reject her. Her pregnancy would reflect on his character. How could he possibly understand her condition? At best her family would allow her to live at home, although their standing in the community would be damaged. But Mary and her baby would be shunned. And no upstanding man would ever marry her because her status would taint any husband. If she wanted to spare her family the shame, she might go to the city to seek anonymity, but single women did not live alone, and there was no work for a single woman, except maybe as a housekeeper for a wealthy family or prostitution.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 22:23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 1:20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence – How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Originally published in Frederick Buechner *A Room to Remember*.

<sup>13</sup> Originally published in Frederick Buechner *A Room to Remember*.