

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

A SERMON FOR ADVENT IV
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 1:18-25

I was talking with a friend of mine the other night. He's recently lost his wife, and when he can't sleep, he calls me, and the sound of my voice calms him, and he can get some rest. I've offered to send him some tapes of my sermons, but he says it isn't the same.

My friend is brilliant. He is a scholar, and a man with a curious mind. He and I were talking the other evening about cloning, and about genetics, and DNA.

One of the things we didn't talk about, but saved for another time, was the conception and the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

More than forty years ago, when I was in seminary, I wrote a major paper on the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Made an A on it. I submitted that paper to the Presbytery of Saint Andrew as a part of my examination for ordination, and they accepted it, and accepted me, and ordained me to the gospel ministry.

What I said then I can still say now: whether Jesus was indeed born of a virgin, or of a young maiden, depending on how one translates the word, Matthew is fairly specific in documenting the doctrine of the virgin birth. We affirm that doctrine every Sunday in the Apostles' Creed.

But for some folks, with scientific minds, with literal minds, with no sense of the miraculous, the doctrine remains a stumbling block to faith, to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, to belief in Jesus as the savior.

There are some things that are beyond our understanding. There are some things that are meant to remain mysteries. There are some questions to which there are no answers, some problems to which there are no solutions.

The birth of Jesus may well be one of those.

Matthew tells us a story that compliments what Luke wrote in his gospel, which tells the story of the angelic visitation and the conception by the Holy Spirit from Mary's point of view.

We have long believed that Joseph was dead before Jesus began His ministry, so Matthew could not have interviewed him for this story. Perhaps Mary told him the story. Perhaps one of the brothers of Jesus, mentioned other places in the gospels, knew the story, had heard it from their father, Joseph, and shared it with Matthew.

The story probably tells us more about Joseph than it does about anything else.

Some have speculated that Joseph was a widower, with other children, and that is how Jesus came to have brothers and sisters. Nothing is said about that in the gospel. That Joseph was older than Mary is a given. In that day and time, a man did not marry until he was 30 or older. But brides were teenagers, often as young as 13 or 14.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed, engaged. It was not unusual for betrothed couples to move in together before the wedding itself. And you thought that was a modern custom! But that had not happened with Mary and Joseph, and so, when Mary turned up pregnant, Joseph was shocked, surprised, maybe a little disappointed.

Joseph could have renounced the engagement, denounced Mary, made a public spectacle, maybe even had her stoned. But instead, he being a righteous man, planned to divorce her quietly. He must have been hurt. He must have been broken-hearted.

But then the angel appeared, in a dream we read in the gospel, and told him not to be afraid, and well, you know the rest.

The name is to be Jesus: Yeshua or Joshua would be another translation. It means savior, and this baby, this Jesus, this is the one who will save the people from their sins.

And Joseph obeyed, and Joseph accepted, and Joseph raised the boy Jesus the best he could, and Joseph is honored as a saint, as the patron saint of carpenters, and Joseph's place in the manger scene and in the story of the birth of Jesus is secure.

Friends, every birth is a miracle. There is a spark of life that is a miracle, that is a blessing, that is beyond our control and beyond our real understanding.

For God one time in all of time and history to reach down and kindle a spark of life in a woman, to send the Holy Spirit's life giving force and to cause a virgin to conceive and bear a child whose name would be called Jesus is not unbelievable. Jesus himself is the one who said, "With God, all things are possible." (Matt. 19:26) Mary is the one who accepted what the angel said by responding, "Let it be with me according to your word." And Joseph is the one who accepted what the angel said, and took Mary to be his wife.

One little story, and then I'll close:

Years ago, a church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi was having a summer vacation bible school. They were having it in homes in different neighborhoods, one home a week, for the whole summer, so that children from neighborhoods could walk or ride their bicycles to participate.

In family rooms, dens, car ports, garages, children learned the stories of Jesus.

The week of July 25, the Christian Educator who had been teaching the classes decided to do something different. She celebrated Christmas in July. She decorated the car port, put up a tree, with presents under it for each child, and for the lesson that day; she was going to read the stories of the birth of Jesus from both Matthew and Luke. She chose to read Matthew first, and as she read it, she noticed one little boy on the front row paying close attention, as though he'd never heard the story before. And when she came to the end, to Matthew 2:55, she read, "and he named Him Jesus."

In the quiet that followed, before she could switch to the Luke version, the little boy uttered these words: "What a shame! They named that baby a cuss word!"

Dear hearts, that was more than forty years ago, and we still live in a world where the name of Jesus is taken in vain, and where little children can think that it is a cuss word, because they are told not to say it the same way they are told not to say other cuss words.

We live in a world where the one who came to save us from our sins has more sinners to save, committing more and more sins, every year.

But the story of the birth of Jesus is still fresh still new, still true, and speaks to us of the coming of the Messiah who was born a babe in Bethlehem, and they called His name Jesus.

And to Him be the power, the glory, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen and Amen.