

QUIET FAITHFULNESS

Fourth Sunday of Advent (12/19/10)

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Matthew 1:18-25



Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

When the Word of God takes on flesh to be with us, nothing is ever the same again. There are very few sure things in life besides death and taxes, but here is one of them. Virgins do not conceive. You don't need an advanced degree in biology to know that. Joseph knew that too. Don't succumb to the silly notion that these were simple, superstitious people living in 1st century Nazareth. Joseph was a carpenter, a practical man who worked with his hands, who dealt in the firm, concrete world of material - wood and blade and nail. He knew full well how girls ordinarily got pregnant, and he knew that it wasn't "by the Holy Spirit."

Joseph was also a just man, a fair and decent man. I agree with the tradition that he was considerably older than Mary and that this was likely an arranged marriage. Were they "in love" as we might be inclined to ask? But that would not have been relevant to Joseph. This was about honor and faithfulness and commitment and community which are the foundation of marriage. Joseph knew he could not marry this pregnant girl, but he didn't want to subject to her shame. No, they couldn't stone her to death any more, but the hard stares from the women of the village and the not-so-soft whispers on the street were punishment enough. He undoubtedly agonized long and hard over what to do. To break off an engagement was essentially the same as divorce. Joseph was willing to "take the hit," to break of the engagement quietly and secretly so that his pregnant fiancé could marry the father of her child. The community would blame him for divorcing her, and Mary would be able to carry on with her life.

When the Son of God takes on flesh to be with us, our best laid plans are thrown into disarray. Our tidy categories are confronted and neat little presuppositions about how God is supposed to work are challenged. God's ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts. "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence," we sang in the Introit. Yes. C'mon down, God, but not this scandalous way - a Child conceived by a virgin mother. This isn't the way our gods should behave. Appear human, as the Greeks had it, well, that's OK. Especially if the gods appear with all our failings. That would make us feel better about ourselves, wouldn't it? But become human? The holy Infinite taking up finite residence in the confines of a mother's womb? Not if you want any credibility in the "religious community." A virgin mother? You may as well have us believe that dead men rise and walk out of their own tombs! Oh yeah, that too!

The incarnation of the Son of God is one of those truly “inconvenient truths.” Like the truth of our sin and our salvation in Jesus. It demands that we reconsider who we are and who God is. Our sinful nature would like very much to have God as far away as possible. “In heaven” would be nice. But not actually here, among us, with us. “Spiritually” is fine so long as it isn’t actually. We’re perfectly fine with a “spiritual” god who doesn’t mess around with our material existence. A god who will make me feel good about myself, who will put a nice religious veneer on my greed, my idolatry, my adultery, my lies, my thefts, and all the other ways I indulge my self. A god who will confirm me in my self-centeredness and reassure me that it really is “all about me.” Those are the kinds of gods we make for ourselves - puppy dog gods that we can lead around on a leash and get them to do little tricks on command. But a God who has the audacity to come to us by being conceived in the womb of a virgin mother - now that’s another matter entirely.

Our worst fears are realized. It would be comfortable (though a false comfort) to think, “Hey, to sin is human. We can’t help ourselves. We’re born that way. It’s built into the machinery” And then the eternal Son of God comes to be with us, and He doesn’t just hang out with us as He did in the Garden, God and man walking together. No, He becomes one of us. He takes up our flesh and blood, our humanity. And He does it sinlessly, perfectly, without compromising one little bit of our humanity. Here we begin to realize how utterly helpless we are to save ourselves. God has to become one of us, a human being, conceived in a virgin mother’s womb without our active involvement. It’s the way of faith that is utterly passive before God, receiving and conceiving the Word. God has to do this for us; we cannot do it for ourselves.

The roots go back to the ancient promise, spoken in the Garden after the Fall: ***“I will put enmity between you and woman,” God said to the serpent, “Between your seed and her seed.”*** The seed of the woman is the key. Ordinarily, it was the seed of the man that produced offspring, but here it is the seed of the woman who would do decisive battle with the devil, crushing the devil’s head with his own cross-bruised heel. Adam is nowhere to be found in this promise.

If you sight down from Mary back to Eve, you’ll see the correspondence. Eve listened to the devil’s lie and was deceived. Mary hearkened to the Word, and she conceived. The Child conceived in her was not another child of Adam, another sinner. What was conceived in her was the Son of God, because God was His Father. He is humanity’s “new Adam,” its new head. The first Adam, made from the dust, brought sin, death, and destruction with his disobedience. Jesus, the second Adam brings forgiveness, life and salvation by fully embracing our humanity in life and in death, literally from the womb to the tomb, and then raising it up to the right hand of the Father.

The reason “God with us” must be virgin-born is that father Adam cannot be involved. Sin is passed down from him, though his seed, to all his children, like some inherited, genetic disease that completely warps our humanity and turns us inward to ourselves. Christ comes to be with us, to bear our humanity perfectly, by way of a daughter of Eve who has not known a man, a virgin mother. So what is conceived in her by the Word and the Spirit is the Word made flesh, the Son of God, God with us.

The popular Christmas carol gets the depth of the Mystery right on the mark:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail! Incarnate Deity! Pleased as Man with us to dwell Jesus, our Immanuel.

Virgin’s don’t conceive. True enough, ordinarily. But when the Word of God is at work, all things are possible. This the Word that brought light out of darkness, that created sea and dry land, and brought forth life. The Word comes to Mary, the daughter of Eve, and she conceives. All things are possible with God.

It took an angel in a dream to convince Joseph that his reason and senses were deceiving him. ***“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*** The second great miracle, after the virgin conception of Jesus, is that Joseph believed the word of the angel and did as he was commanded. He believed that a virgin, his own fiancé, conceived a child by the Holy Spirit, and he acted in trust, and became the surrogate father to the Son of God.

I find it interesting that there is no recorded word of Joseph in the New Testament. Not a single word from the carpenter from Nazareth. It's all action. His actions speak much louder than any of his words, which is proper for a man who made his living building things. His faith is shown by his quiet action. He takes his pregnant fiancé home and marries her, and gives her child the name Jesus. He flees to Egypt when Herod wants to kill the child. He settles in Nazareth when the danger is past. All without so much as a recorded word. Can any words from this man's mouth say more than this simple, faithful act? Can any speech or song say more about the life of faith than this: ***“He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son; and he called His name Jesus”?***

Each of us, in our own way, are inconvenienced by this Word made flesh who is “God with us.” To be baptized into the death and life of Jesus is to have your whole life turned upside down and inside out. To hear the Word of God and to have that Word conceive faith in your heart is to turn you literally inside out, away from your self to life in God and love of your fellow man. To come to the Supper of the Lord is to have your tidy little categories and presuppositions of how God should do things utterly shattered. Bread is His Body; His Body is bread. Wine is His blood; His Blood is wine. How can these things be? Never mind how, God has spoken. The Word declares it to be so. To believe, to trust these things are so will expose you to the scorn and ridicule of a world that believes nothing and so believes anything but the truth. To follow Jesus is to take up one's cross, to partake of the scandal of the enfleshed Word, for we too have been conceived and born anew by the Holy Spirit.

God is with us. That is the joy of this 4th Sunday of Advent. In Jesus, the Son of God, God with us in the most profound and deepest sense. He is with us to save us from Adam's sin and death. He is with us to forgive us our sins. He is with us to raise us from death to life. Immanuel - God is with us - in Baptism, in the Word, in the Body and the Blood, in life, in death. God is with us.

A virgin actually did conceive and bear a son. The Son actually did die and rise again. And you, with faith like trusting Joseph, will actually live forever in Jesus. You've have God's Word on it. In Jesus name, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, **AMEN!**