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# The Genesis of Jesus

Isaiah 7.10-16, Matthew 1.18-25

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 23, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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In a few moments' time we shall stand and say the creed together. We'll say we believe Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit" and "born of the virgin Mary." It may not be news to you to hear that for the last 150 years or so it's been quite fashionable to disbelieve in the virgin birth. Those who love conspiracy theories happily jump to the conclusion that Jesus' real father was a Roman soldier. Those who think Christianity is really a synonym for common sense or social justice tend to ignore the virgin birth as irrelevant. But Matthew doesn't think the virgin birth is a conspiracy or an irrelevance. Remember that, even though his gospel is amazingly short and his Greek is nothing classy, Matthew believes he is writing the most important words that have ever been written. Every event, indeed every word of his gospel is like the Virgin Mary herself: laden with meaning, pregnant with significance.

So what is the meaning of the virgin birth? To start with, Mary is the new Eve. The Old Testament begins with Eve, a woman who causes trouble for her husband by saying yes to sin. The New Testament begins with Mary, a woman who causes trouble for her husband by saying yes to salvation. Whereas Adam is a pushover who compounds his sin by trying to cover it up, Joseph is a righteous man who realizes he can't marry Mary but shows extraordinary mercy by not making a public spectacle of her and banishing her from the garden of respectability. Mary and Joseph together get right what Eve and Adam together got wrong, so Mary is a new Eve.

And the next layer of meaning is that Mary is a new Abraham. Abraham obeyed God's call to leave his known land and go to a place that God had made ready for him. Through the obedience of the one man Abraham, all the families of the nations came to be blessed. Mary and Joseph also left their known land and went to a place that God had made ready for them. Through the obedience of the one woman Mary, all the families of the nations received a blessing. Mary is the new Abraham. Abraham is the father of Israel; Mary is the mother of the Church.

Matthew tells us the two names by which Mary's son is to be known. One name is "Jesus", or literally "Yeshua", which means "salvation." This tells us what the child of Mary and Joseph's obedience is to do: he is to be the new Joshua, who is to bring salvation by leading his people into a new promised land. The other name is "Emmanuel," which literally means "The with-us God." The name Emmanuel shows us who Mary's son is – God with us. The name Yeshua tells us what Jesus does – he saves us.

But this is not all. Matthew makes explicit reference to the prophecy of Isaiah, which we also read together this morning: "Hear then, O house of David: ... the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." This prophecy speaks to the house of David, and Matthew takes it as a promise that Mary's son will be the Son of David, like David himself, restoring Israel to its glory, or like David's son Solomon restoring the Temple, or at least restoring the intimacy between the people and God that Israel had looked to the Temple to guarantee. But the prophecy is set during the time of Ahaz, who was king of Judah around 735 BC, and presided over a disastrous time when God's people were devastated by an Assyrian invasion. The remarkable birth prophesied in the eighth century is in a similar context to the birth of Jesus many centuries later: both are rays of hope in a time of foreign occupation when the Jewish leaders have let their people down.

So Matthew sees layer after layer of significance in a virgin conceiving a son. There's Eve, there's Abraham, there's Joshua, there's David and Solomon, there's deliverance from sin and oppression. What it all amounts to is this. The Old Testament frequently refers to Israel as a young woman. There's a general rule of thumb that whenever the gospel writers speak about Mary they have in their back of their minds a notion that this young woman symbolizes Israel. So what the virgin birth means to Matthew is that Israel could not by itself bring about its own salvation. It couldn't, if you like, *conceive* of its own salvation. But God had chosen never to be

except to be in relationship with us – he is, after all, the With-us God, Emmanuel. So the virgin birth shows how salvation is wholly *God's* initiative, but *Israel*, represented by Mary, is *integral* to the coming of God. Later theologians would formulate the principle that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, which simply expresses the same point in a different way. God could live, could save, on his own, but he chooses to live and save with us. That's what the virgin birth means.

So why is this doctrine somehow the first one to be tossed off the camel when Christians are trying to travel light across the desert of faith? Most of the problem is that those striving to prove Christian truth claims beyond doubt, known collectively as apologists, have used the virgin birth as a kind of trump card in a philosophical party game, and many of their exaggerated claims have done more harm than good.

So, for example, when I was a child I used to love a party game called bran tub where you'd dip your hand deep in a barrel of sawdust and search around and pull out a hidden toy. Christian apologists have used the virgin birth as a toy that proves the Old Testament is a barrel of prophecies that the New Testament fulfills. But this claim falls at the first hurdle. Today's text from Isaiah 7 doesn't say "virgin," it says "young woman." For Matthew to translate it as "virgin" makes a lot of sense in his understanding of who Jesus is – but it's hardly a straightforward fulfillment of prophecy.

To take another example, Christian apologists tend to develop the same "barrel of sawdust" approach to science in a mistaken hope that finding a useful toy after a long rummage somehow advances their claims. So from time to time you hear that certain mammals have the capacity to conceive offspring without male intervention, by a process called parthenogenesis. This is very interesting science but worse than irrelevant to the question of the virgin birth because the point about the virgin birth is not that Joseph *wasn't* involved but that the Holy Spirit *was*. There's obviously a serious scientific objection to the miracle of the virgin birth but it seems to me the response to that objection is not to search deep in the sawdust for obscure counter-science. The only response is to say science studies phenomena that happen repeatedly and predictably whereas Matthew is talking about an event that happened only once.

There's plenty more down in the sawdust barrel, let me assure you. Take the claim that the virgin birth proves that Christ was divine. This seems to come out of some kind of prehistoric rule book of how to be a god, in which we see that Zeus and Dionysus and their mates went in for sophisticated origins so you can tell Jesus is one of big guys because he did some fancy footwork at conception too. The trouble is that a great many people including Jehovah's Witnesses and many Muslims believe in the virgin birth but don't believe in the divinity of Christ. So much for proof.

For all these mistaken claims and plausible counterclaims, the most fashionable objections to the virgin birth are the moral ones. These take two forms. One is to say, why does God waste his time doing unnecessary miracles like a virgin birth when he doesn't seem to have time for much more pressing miracles like ending war and transforming human suffering? It seems to me this kind of argument, while ostensibly based on compassion for those who suffer, is really based on anger and resentment against God for not being exactly the god we want all the time. Surely rather than try to reduce God to our size and our logic, the virgin birth should be something we try to receive as a gift, rather than reject as an insult. The wonder of the virgin birth is not that God pulled off a great stunt or that he suddenly removed human suffering at a stroke: the wonder is that God became fully present among us by bringing humanity and Israel into full participation and friendship with him.

The other moral objection to the virgin birth is that somehow it degrades women, either because it's portrayed as a kind of sexual assault on Mary, or because Mary is taken to be simply passive and meek, or because Mary's virginity plays into a male obsession to see women either as virgins or as whores, and to see sexual desire as a destructive phenomenon for which women are somehow to blame. I think the Church has to acknowledge that there is much truth in this moral objection. The way Mary has been used as a figure to diminish women is not a proud aspect of our Christian heritage. But while acknowledging the false ways the story has been used over the centuries, I would deny that the conception of Jesus by the conjunction of Mary and the Holy Spirit inherently degrades women. It's clear that it's a matter of joy for Mary, a development she actively embraces,

and, given that the Holy Spirit is neither male nor female, there's no man in sight. And don't forget that Jesus must have spent his whole life under some kind of social stigma because of the question-mark over his origins.

So Matthew gives us layer upon layer of meaning that Mary represents Israel in providing the human context in which God could become known in the world. Some objections to the virgin birth are mistaken. But others are significant. So to believe in the virgin birth will always be a matter of faith rather than of certainty. But I want to finish by drawing one final parallel between Israel's faith and ours.

Israel's faith was cradled in the manger of exile. 500 years before Christ the people of God made the long journey to Babylon, and when they got there they had no place to stay. While in Babylon they remembered their sojourn a thousand years earlier in Egypt, where again they had no place to stay. The early Christians remembered those two long journeys of their people, to Egypt and to Babylon, and how both times God's people had no place to stay and God brought them home. But the early Christians reflected on two more long journeys. There was the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Again, no place to stay. And there was the journey of God in Christ from heaven to earth. But this, the biggest journey of all, was different. There *was* a place to stay. Mary was that place. Mary shows us joyous human hospitality for the miracle of God's activity.

In Babylon, Israel discovered that the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt was the very same God who had created the heavens and the earth. The savior God was the creator God. The name for the union of salvation and creation was Israel. The early Christians made this same discovery in reflecting on the coming of Jesus. They realized that God's decision to save us is written into the very fabric of creation. The conception of Jesus is an act of creation and at the same time an act of salvation. In other words, the place where salvation and creation come together is called Mary.

We make that discovery when we see the Greek word Matthew uses both at the start of today's passage and at the start of his whole gospel: *genesis*. Sound familiar? Genesis. The bible is the story of salvation but it starts with the story of creation which we call Genesis. The gospel is the story of salvation but it begins with a story of creation which Matthew calls "genesis."

What that word "genesis" means is that *the conception of Jesus is the beginning of all things*. Not chronologically, maybe, but the conception of Jesus names God's decision never to be except to be for us in Christ – and that decision is the beginning of all creation, of all life, of all salvation, of everything that matters. And so we see that *creation itself is a kind of virgin birth*, because it was creation from nothing, and it was brought about by the Holy Spirit. And *the virgin birth is a new creation*, or perhaps even the original creation, because it too is brought about in some ways out of nothing, by the action of the Holy Spirit, although this time, gloriously, with a woman at the center of God's action. We have been brought out of nothing to be made for relationship with God, and God has made a home among us to unite our hearts with his. Creation is a virgin birth. A virgin birth is creation. As we say in North Carolina "How 'bout that?"

Maybe it's time believing in the virgin birth came back into fashion.