

When Light Meets Flesh, Part 1

Luke 1:26-38

Sunday, December 20, 2020, Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

Gospel Lesson, Luke 1:26-38

Second Gospel Lesson, Matthew 1:18-25 by Pastor Dave

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[a] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[a] because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^[a] (which means “God with us”).

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Sermon, “When Light Meets Flesh” by Pastor Dave

I earned my bachelor’s degree from North Central Bible College in Minneapolis. NCBC, as we called it, was and is affiliated with the Assemblies of God. When I attended there, the school trained mostly men to serve as pastors in the Assemblies of God. And in doing so, the curriculum combined a typical liberal arts degree with a three-year seminary degree. That means that sandwiched somewhere between classes in Greek and Systematic Theology and Homiletics, I had a basic science course.

I remember one session in which the professor was discussing genetics, and described the traits of recessive and dominant genes. The example he used was color blindness, which he explained is inherited as a recessive trait on the X chromosome. In other words, color blindness is an X-linked recessive inheritance.

Being somewhat of a smart aleck, and knowing that the Assemblies of God believe in divine healing, and knowing that the class was filled with prospective Assemblies of God pastors and pastors’ wives, I asked, “If God truly healed a man of color blindness, wouldn’t that mean that God would also have to change that man’s genetic makeup so he would be unable to pass that trait on to his children and his children’s children?”

In other words, would God heal the man’s chromosomes and not just his eyes?

The professor had no clue as to how to respond to that question. Maybe it’s what I described last week as a “stupid question.”

On the other hand, I think that little conundrum I raised points out the complexity of what happened following the story Kathleen read, in which Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary and announced to her that she would conceive in her womb and give birth to Jesus, the Son of the Most High.

That episode is called the Annunciation; annunciation is simply a fancy word for *announcement* or *proclamation*. Luke is the only Gospel writer who records the Annunciation to Mary; Matthew has an annunciation story, but it is to Joseph, and we'll get to that shortly.

Notice how Mary, a humble teenage girl and a peasant receives that that mind-boggling news: she simply asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

The Angel Gabriel responds by saying, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

What? That's all the explanation you're going to give? I need a more scientific explanation! I need a more biologically complete explanation! I need details!

But no details are provided. Gabriel simply adds, "So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

To help you fathom just how complex this miracle of "overshadowing by the Holy Spirit" was, consider the fact that this single human seed—though it incarnated the very Son of God who created all that was and all that is and all that ever shall be—this single human seed was now insufficient to live on its own. The Life-giver of the universe was now reduced to something that could not live on its own; it wasn't even a complete life.

In order for that single seed to truly become flesh—in order for that divine seed to truly become one of us—that seed had to unite with the virgin's egg. In other words, divine DNA—if there is such a thing as divine DNA—that divine DNA had to connect with human DNA in order for Jesus to become not only fully God but also fully human.

I confess to you that I can't fully wrap my mind around it. It is a mystery. It is a miracle. But it is also what Christmas is all about.

Even before we knew there was such a thing as DNA, theologians, pastors and Popes wrestled with the complexity of the mystery I'm describing. Way back in 1854, Pope Pius formally established the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. And the Immaculate Conception had nothing to do with Terry Bradshaw or Franco Harris.

According to the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, "by a special grace and privilege of Almighty God," Mary was born without the taint of original sin. Catholic scholars couldn't comprehend Jesus taking up residence in the body of a sinner, so in 1854, the Catholic Church formally asserted not only the sinlessness of Mary, but also her perpetual virginity.

I don't mean to pick on the Catholics, but I think that doctrine somewhat diminishes the magnitude of the Incarnation. I believe the miracle of the Incarnation of Jesus is even more remarkable if we believe Jesus took up residence in the body of a sinful girl, thereby rendering her as an unwed pregnant teenager.

In just a few minutes, Molly Joseph will play “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” and I hope you join in, wherever you might be. It’s one of the greatest hymns by one of history’s greatest and most prolific hymnwriters, Charles Wesley. This past Friday marked his birthday; he was born 313 years ago on December 18, 1707.

One of the characteristics of Charles Wesley’s hymns are their rich, theological depth, and Hark the Herald Angels Sing is a perfect example of that depth. Here are the words to the third verse:

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”

I would like to draw your attention to one key phrase: “Mild he lays his glory by.” What that means is that Jesus willingly and without coercion set aside all the glory and trappings of heaven and was willingly implanted into the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit as the power of the Most High overshadowed her.

Charles Wesley makes it clear—and the scriptures bear it out—that Christ existed before he entered Mary’s womb. He existed as the Creator and Lord of all the Universe. Yet that Creator—that Lord—allowed himself to be reduced to a single human seed—that wasn’t even viable on its own—and then allowed himself to be placed in a virgin’s womb.

It’s so mind-boggling that no wonder critics and so-called scholars reject the notion of the virgin birth. But look at the story as it’s presented in Matthew’s Gospel. As I mentioned earlier, there we find the story of the Annunciation to Joseph.

It’s helpful to remember that Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. Matthew is especially concerned with the fulfillment of scripture.

Because Matthew is so concerned about showing how Old Testament scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus, he is quick to quote Isaiah 7:14 which reads, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel which means, “God with us.”

It’s why we profess in the Apostles’ Creed that Jesus Christ was “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary...”

There are those who have studied Isaiah 7 and correctly state that “virgin” could be translated as “young woman.” They have then advocated that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but simply of a “young woman.”

In Isaiah’s day, the prophet was simply giving a sign to King Ahaz of Judah by saying that God would deliver Judah before a particular young woman delivered a baby. No doubt the

young woman wasn't even pregnant at the time the prophecy was given; but when she would become pregnant, she would become so in the usual course of nature. Isaiah pointed to the young maid and said by the time her yet unconceived son is old enough to eat his own curds and honey, Judah's enemies would be laid to waste.

Matthew applied that promise to Jesus, but with an important caveat: Matthew makes it clear that Mary would remain a virgin until after she gave birth to the Savior.

That's why it's so important for Matthew to tell us that Joseph was ready to quietly end his engagement to Mary: Joseph knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that he had honored and protected Mary's purity.

We also know that Mary was a virgin because of the words and actions of the angels who appear in Matthew as well as in Luke.

Why is it important to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin? There are several reasons: First, the world has seen any number of prophets who claimed that they came from God:

- The late David Berg who founded the cult sect, Children of God in 1968
- The late Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Guru of the Rajneesh movement which established a sizeable and controversial colony in Oregon in the 1980s.
- The late David Koresh, founder of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas
- And of course, Mohammed himself, who founded Islam some 1400 years ago.
- Along with countless others.

They all claimed to have come from God, but not one of them could back up his claim by saying that the Holy Spirit had overshadowed his mother so that that which was born of them was the holy son of God.

Only Jesus could make that claim. Only Jesus could say that he had come from God and could back it up by saying that he was born of a virgin who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit of God.

A second reason why it is important to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin is because we need to come to grips with the extreme measures Christ was willing to go just to open the way of salvation for us. The Son of God's willingness to be reduced to human form just to save mere mortals is tantamount to you saying that you would be willing to be reduced to an ant just to save a colony of ants in an anthill. Would you do that? Me neither.

But that makes me think of Louis Cassels who authored the popular column "Religion in America" from 1955 until he died of a heart attack in 1974; he was only 52.

Perhaps his most popular column was a modern parable published in December 1959. It's a parable about a modern man. He was a kind and decent man, generous to his family and upright in his dealings with others. He was a good man, but he did not believe in all that incarnation stuff which we profess in the Apostles' Creed. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus story about God coming to earth as a man and he was too honest of a man to pretend otherwise.

So when Christmas Eve came around he said to his wife and children, "I'm not going to church with you. I'd feel like a hypocrite. I'd just as soon stay home."

So he stayed home while his family went off to church.

Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries as they got heavier and heavier. Then he went back to his easy chair and returned to his book.

A short time later he was startled by a thud against his window pane. Then another. And another.

At first, he thought that someone must be throwing snowballs against the living room window, but when he went outside to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. In a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He thought of the barn where they stabled a pony: that would provide the birds with a warm shelter if he could direct them to it.

He quickly put on his coat and boots and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the door wide and turned on a light for the birds. Then he tried catching them. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them, waving his arms. Instead, they just scattered in every direction except the warm, lighted barn.

Then he realized they were afraid of him. "To them," he reasoned, "I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of a way to let them know that they can trust me—that I'm not trying to hurt them; I'm only trying to help them find a safe place. But how?"

Any move he made tended to frighten them or confuse them. They would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared the man.

"If only I could be a bird myself," he reasoned. "If only I could be a bird and mingle with them and speak their language and tell them not to be afraid. I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn. But I'd have to be one of them so they could see. And hear. And understand."

At that moment, the church bells began to ring: Merry Christmas! He listened to the bells pealing the glad tidings of old. And in that moment, he sank to his knees in the snow and prayed.

That, my friends, is why Jesus was "conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."