

# VIRGIN FAITH

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## **Virgin Faith Luke 1:30-45**

For many of us modern, sophisticated, scientifically oriented people, the story of the virgin birth makes us squeamish. Frankly, we feel a little embarrassed when we hear it read out loud. We like to race through that part of the nativity story as quickly and as quietly as we can and get on with the more heart warming part about the journey to Bethlehem and Jesus' humble birth in the manger, the angelic choir singing to shepherds and the magi from the east following the star to bring gifts in homage to the new born king. When we read the nativity story to our children, we cringe at the prospect of their stopping us precisely at the passage we read this morning and asking, "What's a virgin?"

For some, Mary's virginity is a litmus test of faith. It was proclaimed as one of the five fundamentals of the Christian faith at that World's Christian Fundamental's Association held in Philadelphia in 1919. Because Jesus is the Son of God, he can not have had an earthly father. Either you believe that Mary was a virgin or else you deny the divinity of Jesus. For others, Mary's virginity strains the credibility of the Christian faith. Faith that requires a willingness to suspend all modern knowledge of how things work in the world lacks integrity. Believing in the virgin birth is kind of like believing in Santa Claus. The truth of the story changes with maturity.

Battles still rage over Mary's brief response to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?", and none of those battles are worth waging. Mary's virginity is not about gynecology. Luke is not telling us how Jesus was born. He is telling us something important about who Jesus is. He is telling us that the child conceived in Mary's womb is holy. The Apostle Paul, whose letters are the earliest writings in the New Testament collection, says nothing about how Jesus was born. But in the opening words of his letter to the Colossians he writes, "(Jesus) is the image of the invisible God...in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. (Col 1: 15,19)" How it happened is a mystery, but what we celebrate at Christmas is God entering our world and dwelling among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

So this morning I want to invite us to put away the battles we have waged over how Jesus was born. But instead of skipping over the virgin birth, and as squeamish as it might make us, I want to challenge us to think more deeply about virginity as we focus our attention on Mary and the truth she reveals about Christmas.

Unlike Elizabeth and Zechariah, Luke gives us no background story on Mary. She is named for the first time when Luke informs us that the angel Gabriel was sent to her by God. Luke offers no insight into the vetting process that God went through in selecting Mary. There is no genealogy linking her to other significant forbearers of our faith, no details about her character or virtue, no affirmation of her extraordinary faith or piety. Luke can provide no special reason for why Gabriel was sent by God to Mary. The only distinguishing characteristic he identifies is her virginity. What are we to make of that? We get a lot of background on the parents of John the Baptist, but why does Luke identify Mary's virginity as her only defining trait? What is he trying to tell us about Christmas?

Last week when I met with the Awestruck planning team that is working with this text for Wednesday night's celebration, I asked them to think about what meanings they associate with the word "virgin." After reflecting for a while, they identified these traits: new, unknown, inexperienced, unfamiliar. Those are essential qualities that Mary introduces to the Christmas story.

It is interesting that we have taken a story about something new that God is doing in the world and have encapsulated in tradition. We have turned a virgin moment into an annual ritual repeated over and over again in exactly the same form for 2000 years. We have taken the story of a young woman's new and unfamiliar experience of God working in her life and have turned it into a story that is so familiar that we already know everything there is to know about it.

But what if Luke introduced Mary to us as a virgin in order to emphasize that God was doing something new and unfamiliar? What if Luke's nativity, in addition to being a story about a singular event that took place 2000 years ago, is also a story about the new and unfamiliar thing that God is doing in our

lives as well? What if God is still being born in us today?

Last week John the Baptist called us to prepare the way of the Lord by bearing fruits worthy of repentance. Today Mary, the blessed virgin, invites us to prepare for Christmas by focusing on what is virgin in our own spiritual lives right now. What new and unfamiliar thing is God birthing in you today?

What is virgin in my own spiritual life these days is a growing awareness of the importance of contemplative prayer. Thirty years ago when I began my first pastorate, if one of my colleagues would have suggested that I sit in silence with them thirty minutes a day, I would have said, "No thank you, I have more important things to do." Back then, I was all about being busy with the Lord's work. I had parishioners to visit, sermons to write, meetings to prepare for and volunteers to recruit. I was way too busy to sit in silence with colleagues for thirty minutes every day. Even though Jesus said, "apart from me you can do nothing (John 15: 5)," I was convinced that without me God could do nothing.

But this advent when my colleagues Emily Joye and Tom invited me to sit in silent prayer with them for 30 minutes every day between 3:30 and 4:00 PM, something virgin to my faith was born. Instead of praying with an agenda, instead of praying with a list of concerns and questions I wanted addressed, instead of praying with someone else's words to read and reflect on, I am learning to pray empty handed. I am learning to sit still and listen and wait and trust that God will touch my heart if I simply create the space to pay attention.

Today what is virgin in my life with God is that I am beginning to understand how important it is to sit in silence. Today I am much less confident about what I know and what I understand and what I can accomplish. Today I realize that my heart and soul need time to catch up with my head and hands. Today I can't imagine how I could possibly function as a pastor without spending at least thirty minutes in silent prayer every day.

And today I realize what a blessing it is to have colleagues and parishioners who bless me when we meet together for prayer. That, too, is a lesson I have learned from Mary.

When the virgin activity of God began to impact Mary's life, she immediately sought the company of a trusted person of faith who was able to affirm the significance of what God was doing. Luke tells us that after her encounter with the Angel Gabriel, "Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Elizabeth saw what was virgin in Mary's life and called her "blessed." It was an important word for Mary to hear since, under Jewish law, Mary was condemned. Leviticus, that book we love to quote whenever we want to condemn someone or some group of people, specifies that any betrothed woman who becomes pregnant by someone else shall be stoned to death. But when Elizabeth saw the new thing that God was birthing in Mary's life, she called her "blessed." Thank God for the Elizabeth's of the world! Like Mary, we need to seek out trusted people of faith who can affirm the significance of the new thing that God is bringing to birth in our lives today.

When the Angel Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive in her womb and bear a son and name him Jesus, Mary said to the angel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" In response, Gabriel did not give her a gynecological explanation. He said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you." That is what happens whenever we allow God to enter our lives in new and unfamiliar ways.

Mary isn't the only virgin in the Christmas story. Mary helps all of us prepare for Christmas by identifying what is virgin in our life with God today. Amen.



