

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (274)

It's hard to believe. Some parts of our faith story: they're hard to believe. In fact, you can get really hung up on them, these hard-to-believe events, as if the entirety of your faith depends on them—the virgin birth, Jesus walking on water and calming storms, feeding crowds to full (five loaves of bread, two fish), raising Lazarus from the dead. Really, if the question of whether you believe this thing or that thing becomes the focal point of your faith, you can maybe even lose your faith.

The virgin birth: this is one of them. It's a litmus test: are you a real Christian? are you a true believer? It's a watershed assertion: it separates the true from the tepid.

But maybe when it comes to these incredible narrative assertions, the better question than whether you believe it's true is this question: "If it's true, then what does it mean?"

The virgin birth: if it's true, then what does it mean? What does it suggest?

The problem isn't sex. The problem a virgin birth might address isn't a problem of sex, as if the typical way people get made is itself problematic. We've read that into it, Christian tradition has. But I don't think it's essential to it.

The problem it might mean to address is one of over-particularity.

Jesus is God-with-us. Jesus is God-made-flesh, a particular person born in a particular place at a particular time in the human story. But the virgin birth would make that particularity also peculiar, a setting apart from the sort of inheritance each of us is otherwise born into.

Think about it: we're born into the problems this world, we're born into the alliances and identifications and enmities that define so much of the life of the world. And these will come to

define us, if we're not mindful in our resistance to our little tribal perspectives, if we're not mindful to practice an expansion of perspective, the sort of thin repentance, as *metanoia* urges upon us. *Metanoia*, repentance: that change of mind, that expansion of mind to imagine what is behind and before and beyond what we typically know. We're born into dynamics and even conflicts generations in the making, our own particularity a plugging into so much of the inter-generational dynamics and politics and strife of this world.

All of which can become ever more conflicted if we try to rise above it all, if we try to exercise some higher authority to bring some justice, some peace, some rest to all that strife. But whose authority would qualify here? When it comes to adjudicating what justice might look like in Gaza, for example, whose authority would qualify, would win the trust of every party pulled ever more forcefully into an intergenerational conflict of historic proportion? Everyone is simply too partial to be universally trusted. Everyone is assumed already as partisan in this conflict that becomes evermore entrenched.

The virgin birth has something to say here. The notion that someone might arrive in this imminent frame yet from a transcendent plane: perhaps in this there will come relief. Perhaps of this there will come salvation—salvation for all.

Don't get me wrong: I'm no fool. I don't mean to suggest that any religious assertion of Jesus as such a transcendent authority would do the trick here. I don't imagine going to Gaza to proclaim Jesus as Lord would be taken as anything other than one more worldly power-grab. No, I mean rather to suggest that the storied fact, which casts Jesus as one of us and as not one of us, as particular but not partial, as enfleshed but not enmeshed, points to one of the most persistent problems of life amidst this creation which is both good and garbled, the question of what authority transcends when all earthly authority breaks down amidst corruption or conflict.

And this pointing to a so persistent problem can then excite in the human heart and understanding a new possibility when it comes to salvation, a new possibility in which we might hope.

Time was the messiah was expected to be a warrior, a powerful partisan fighting for the sake of God's chosen people, fighting *against* any who might count as enemies of this chosen people. With Jesus, the Messiah is utterly reimaged, powerful in his resisting taking sides, faithful rather to abundant life for all.

Truly, the assertion that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, hard as it is to believe, and puzzling as to the technical aspects of how this could be: less important than

whether you believe it is what this confession implies—that in and by and through and with Jesus, God interrupts history, God disrupts the dread inheritance of sin which one generation passes on to the next, God opens a way for grace by which we might be freed or at least by which we might imagine so radically being freed.

The sin that clings so closely—the personal sin of our stalwart compulsion to put our own needs ahead of anyone else’s needs, the structural sin on which every social order builds itself up: that this tangled mess might be disrupted by grace: this is what Mary said yes to: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be with me just as you’ve said.”

And this might also be what we say yes to, if not in our believing it, than perhaps trusting it and finding in it the stirrings of hope, hope that God has in mind such liberation for us, such salvation that sin might not forever determine our course and our commitments.

Because as much as I might imagine finding enjoyment in, for example, people who offend me coming to some suffering, I aim all the more to imagine finding enjoyment in such a sense of offence melting away in favor of goodwill and peace among all people, all creation. Truly, as much as I might relish my resentments, I imagine I’d all the more love love.

So, it’s hard to believe. But it’s better anyway to hope for—God-with-us, and not just some of us, but each and all. This is what’s born on Christmas morn, this hope, this new possibility, this sounding joy.

Thanks be to God.