

## **“Doing the Right Thing (Whether or Not Mary Was a Virgin)”**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

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**3rd Sunday in Advent**

**December 11, 2022**

We struggle to do the right thing, at least those of us who care, which I'd garner is most people who are listening in today. Whether to take or quit that job, how and when to discipline that errant child, what boundaries to put up, or relax, around that parent's growing needs. We struggle with our choices in this complex world - whether to take that trip that could strengthen the family but hurt the planet, how the racism in our family or nation's history may have given us an unfair edge and what to do about it, and how to be a good citizen in a cynical time when we have to measure whether more engagement will make a difference or just burn us out. We struggle to do the right thing, at least those of us who care.

Joseph is a person who cares. And, absent his dreams, doing the right thing in this situation should be clear and direct. Mary is pregnant with someone else's child. The law is clear - end the engagement and move on. The Law of Moses was extreme in the case of adultery - it required capital punishment for Mary's offense (Deuteronomy 22:23-27). But by Joseph's time, rabbinic practice had interpreted this law in more compassionate ways. No capital punishment, just a humiliating, public divorce. The kind where people look at you as a failure, or at fault.

But of course, no one was at fault the way most of us have read this text through the years. The child is conceived by the Holy Spirit - the great virgin birth. Just as God had opened the wombs of women of the covenant, with Mary, God doubled down on their miraculous life-giving power - no male involved in this conception! In this traditional virgin birth reading, I'm not sure Joseph even needed a dream to explain to him the nature of the situation. Mary could have told him herself. In that case, the real issue is Joseph's willingness to believe his "almost wife's" testimony, something he ought to have done without the assistance of the Holy Spirit!

Yet some scholars don't think this text speaks of a virgin birth at all. Andrew Lincoln in his book *Born of a Virgin?: Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* argues that the traditional way of reading this text is so ingrained in us that we have a hard time seeing what is actually in the text.<sup>1</sup> Examining contemporary beliefs of how conception of a baby was understood, as well as other texts that speak of the Holy Spirit's involvement in conception, Lincoln highlights the well known issue in this text

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?: Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing), 2013. Perhaps more informative and concise was Lincoln's article that formed the basis for his book, "Contested Paternity and Contested Readings: Jesus' Conception in Matthew 1.18-25," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34(3) 211-231, 2012.

that the Greek word interpreted as “virgin” can also mean “young woman,” which is the actual meaning of the Isaiah text quoted.<sup>2</sup> “The young woman shall become pregnant and give birth to a son.” What’s more, there are several places in scripture where “by the Holy Spirit” is attached to news of a woman’s conception of a child, in no way meaning that a man wasn’t also involved in the process. Plus, “having no marital relations” with Mary isn’t necessarily noted by Matthew as a way of proving a virgin birth as much it shows Joseph’s righteousness since abstaining from sex through the entire pregnancy was considered the righteous norm. But wait there’s more. Matthew’s genealogy which we examined a few weeks ago, includes 5 women all of whom are involved in what may be considered scandalous sexual situations which turn out advancing God’s interests in the world. If Matthew had in mind supporting the purity of Mary, why not name other women from the same line whose conceptions were considered miraculous instead of highlighting women who fulfilled God’s objective through scandals such as these?

If you’re at all confused, or disappointed in the possibility that Mary might be a little more wobbly on that high pedestal where we’ve put her, imagine how Joseph must have felt. For us it’s an interesting question of history, faith, and doctrine. For him it’s a dilemma that he didn’t ask for, certainly didn’t want, but now has to live. It’s his life. We could wonder the same about Mary’s own dilemma, but Matthew’s not all that interested in Mary. Luke’s interested in Mary. Matthew gives Joseph the spotlight here. Why?

Because one of Matthew’s big concerns will be what does righteousness really mean for followers of Jesus? And what’s the relationship between the law, faith, and obedience? And given that I often hear women and men complaining about how many problems of the world are created by men who don’t seem to be considering what the right thing might be, much less doing it, I think it’s more than okay to put the spotlight on Joseph and wonder with him what does it mean to do the right thing in a situation where the law seems clear, where circumstances are less than ideal, where a single right way forward seems like a dead end for everyone involved.

I don’t know whether I believe Andrew Lincoln’s well founded scholarship or not. Both versions of the story are exciting to me - the one where Mary’s conception is miraculous and the one where it’s utterly ordinary. In one version, Joseph and Mary have to deal with the reality of God’s awesome power enacting something beyond their imagination but also, as Michele pointed out last week, overriding some of their consent. Faith often seems like that. Life unfolds in ways you would not choose with God seemingly arranging pieces on a chessboard not of your own choosing.

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<sup>2</sup> The details are interesting. The Hebrew word in Isaiah 7:14, *almah*, simply means young woman and not virgin. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek for the authoritative Septuagint translation, the word that was chosen for the Isaiah text was *parthenos*, which “is a perfectly good translation, since one of its standard references in Greek is also to a young woman of child-bearing age who had not had a child.” (Lincoln, “Contested Paternity). How the word is translated depends on context which Lincoln argues is not to argue for Mary’s virginity at all.

In another version, we get the real possibility that Mary was as human as any other teenager. There are a thousand different possibilities of how she might have become pregnant by someone else. Against her will? Possibly. A weekend accident? Maybe. Her first teenage love gone past the boundaries she had set for herself? Perhaps. Whatever the circumstances in this version of the story, our full humanness doesn't seem to present any barriers to God's extraordinary work. Despite our reverent doctrines making out Mary to be some near divine figure herself, I kind of like girl-next-door Mary who gets to be the mother of God not because she's perfect but because God knows, despite her imperfections, she's the person God believes is perfect for the job.

Either way, I decided after our Bible study this week that rather than try to argue for a single reading over the other today, maybe the better thing is not to be so quick to choose between either. Not to be so quick to judge one as right and one as wrong. Not to be guided by fear of choosing an unorthodox reading on the one hand or fear of being seen as too orthodox on the other. After all, the best thing that Joseph seemed to do in this situation was not to be swayed by a single way, but to stay open to possibility, open to his own imagination - in those places where God is able to reach him.

Like an earlier Joseph in scripture who had dreams and learned to interpret God's messages within them, this Joseph dreamed, too.<sup>3</sup> We all dream. Freud knew this well. He encouraged his patients to listen to dreams to better understand what those dreams might be telling them. I'm told that in Freud's early days, the common consensus was that dreams were meaningless, just "random by-products of the brain's functioning during sleep," a view still held by some scientists today.<sup>4</sup> But people of faith have always understood the need to stay open to dreams - the place where holy messengers whisper ways forward in the dark.

In Joseph's dream, an angel said basically the same things all angels say in scripture - do not be afraid. Like Freud but also theologians going back to the time of Jesus, angels know that fear is the thing that often gets in the way of clear thinking, feeling, and loving. Do not fear isn't a shaming phrase designed to make fearful people grit their teeth. It's an assurance that wherever there is fear, God is also present. A voice to lead us through fear. A voice to guide us beyond fear. And God takes us through that fear by opening us to new possibilities where we had a hard time imagining them on our own.

That's the heart of our resurrection faith which as any scholar will tell you is the lens through which all of the gospels are written. The event that defines Jesus' impact

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<sup>3</sup> See Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37 that lead his brothers to try to kill him. Later, his dream interpretation abilities end up saving his life and leading him to immense power - Genesis 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> See "Freud's Methods for Interpreting Dreams," on the Freud London Museum. Website viewed on Friday, December 9, 2022, <https://www.freud.org.uk/education/resources/the-interpretation-of-dreams/freuds-method-for-interpreting-dreams/>

on us shining through on every page. The conviction that in our saddest experiences, our biggest dead-end moments, those places where we are sure there is nothing but heartache, death, or ending, God brings new life. The self-help section will tell you that new life was already there, but to me the most hopeful thing is the assurance of God's activity in the midst of actual lifelessness. God's energy, activated in the presence of actual dead ends.

Just ask Joseph. The righteous man who had all but resigned himself to the sad truth that there was a single, sad way out of this mess - namely, following the normal way of doing what is right to its literal ending of his relationship with Mary. Inside his dream he learned of a new possibility. That God could make Jesus every bit his own child through adoption - plainly the biggest miracle that Matthew wants us to see.

At the end of the day, I don't think the virgin birth matters too much to Joseph. Whether Mary slept with someone else or conceived a child miraculously, what matters to Joseph is how to deal with the reality that's before him in a loving, righteous way. And for Joseph the way to deal with any reality before you is to listen for God's leading first through the law but also beyond it.

For some that's a hard word. Wouldn't it be easier if we had a set of rules that applied consistently in all places and in all times? Perhaps that's why it's easier to pretend that fighting over whether the virgin birth is true or not is the critical issue for faith. If we just get our doctrines right, our faith will follow, too.

But for anyone who's ever found themselves at a crossroads where there seemed like only one way forward - a single, sad way forward, perhaps news that God is alive beyond our attempts to pin her down is the best good news they've ever received. With God all things are possible, as Jesus will later tell disciples who suddenly discover that they'll never be righteous enough to earn their way into God's favor (Matthew 19:26).

Perhaps that is the central message of the Advent season, the central message of the Christmas story, handed down generation to generation. The most important doctrine to remember. Just the right amount of hope for any and every situation. The right word for anyone struggling to do the right thing in a difficult situation, when life gets hard and options seem few. Fear not. God is here and ready to walk with you. Fear not, with God there is a way forward when there seems like no way. Fear not, with God all things are possible.