

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, December 22, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT; BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY”

Matthew 1:20,25

In a Family Circus cartoon, the little girl Dolly sits with her baby brother on her lap and tells him the Christmas story. It goes like this: "Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole, surrounded by 8 tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary . . . Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes . . . The 3 wise men and elves all sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree . . . In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw this star..." Thus concludes the Christmas story from the Family Circus.

We chuckle, but it is easy to get the Christmas story a bit mixed up, especially at this time of year when our minds are distracted by many things. In fact, it's easy to get the essentials of the Christian faith mixed up at any time. That's why it's good we have the Apostles' Creed, that ancient, but useful and easily memorized summary of the Christian faith. It really keeps us on track and brings right to the core of our faith.

The heart of the Christmas story is found in these words from the Apostles Creed, "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary..." And these words, "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" come directly from Scripture, from the passage we read from Matthew chapter 1. Verse 20, "But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'" Then verse 25, "...but (Joseph) had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." Now what do the words, "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary", tell us about Jesus' coming?

First, they tell us that that Jesus' coming was God's action.

Now we believe that God the Creator is involved with the conception and birth of every child. But with the conception and birth of his Son, God acted directly. God obviously needed the obedient cooperation of Mary and Joseph, but he didn't wait for them to act. God took the initiative and acted first. Jesus was conceived and born not of the will of the flesh, but of the will of God. The conception of Jesus happened by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' birth happened at the time and place of God's choosing. Paul tells us that "in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son." Jesus' coming was God's gracious action.

Now I know some people have trouble believing in the virgin birth. I understand that, because it's obviously is not how the rest of us were conceived. I used to question it myself. But now I have a better grasp of God's power and ability. This is our Father's world and he is not bound by

the usual methods he put in place when there is a higher purpose at stake. Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb by power of the Holy Spirit. Why should we think such a thing is impossible for God? Think of Psalm 8. David writes, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Change that a bit. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars that you have established, what is a virgin birth for you, the Great Creator of all things large and small?" This amazing universe, from the farthest star to the complexity of a single cell, points to the Creator's awesome power and ability. So yes, I believe in the virgin birth, or more correctly, the virgin conception of Jesus. It is surely not beyond the power and ability of the God who created this universe and raised his Son from the dead on Easter morning. And Scripture had predicted it. Isaiah wrote, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel - God with us." Jesus' virgin birth was confirmed by Matthew in today's passage and also by Luke the physician, in his Gospel. And there are hints of it in John's Gospel, as well.

A professor at Harvard Divinity School was ridiculed by some students for believing in the Virgin Birth. One student challenged him, "So if some young woman came into the hospital and said that she was going to have a baby, that she was a virgin, and that an angel had appeared to her, you would believe her?" The old professor hesitated but then answered slowly, "No, I probably wouldn't believe her story. But I'll tell you this - if that baby grew to manhood and his teachings changed the course of history, if he grew up and died on the cross and rose from the dead, if 2,000 years later one-third of the world's population called him Savior and Lord - if that happened, I would give that girl's story a second hearing!"

Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." The coming of Jesus was God's action. That's the first thing. And that means that God is active in this world now. God is with us, Emmanuel, and thank God it's not all up to us. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is an active God who is not aloof from the world or from our lives. Never think that God has forgotten you or given up on you. Look to God with hope, trusting that he will act for you and for us, according to his plan and his timing. God acts decisively when the time is right. Trust that God is active among us right now, working out his good purposes for you, for us, for the church, and for the world.

"Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." Secondly, these words tell us that Jesus' coming brings salvation.

The angel told Joseph, verse 21, "She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." God left nothing to chance. He even chose the name for his son. The name Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means "God saves" or "God is salvation." His name describes what he came into the world to do.

The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin is tied closely to his saving mission. Here's how Jesus' virgin birth and our salvation tie together. Now please follow me carefully here. The plan for our salvation was there from the beginning. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God said to the serpent, Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your

seed and her seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." Now the last part refers to the serpent bruising and killing Jesus on the cross; but also speaks of Jesus ultimate victory over evil, bruising his head.

But in the first part of the verse, the words "her seed" are very important. Every other place in Scripture people are conceived by the seed of the father. But the promised Saviour would be born of the mother's seed. That's because the sin nature is transferred through the seed of the father. Now that doesn't mean that women are sinless. Women, you too need a Saviour. You have a human father. Mary was a sinner too, but she didn't transfer the sin nature to Jesus as a human father would have. Jesus' father was holy God, by the action of the Holy Ghost. So Jesus didn't inherit the sin nature. Jesus was like Adam in the beginning before Adam disobeyed. Of course, Adam sinned and took on the sin nature which was transferred to all of us. Now if Jesus had sinned he then would have taken on the same sin nature. Jesus certainly could have sinned, but he did not. He always did his Father's will all the way to death on the cross. So he was the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for our sins. No one else could have saved us. Jesus' virgin birth is not sufficient in itself to save us, but it was necessary to our salvation. Don't dismiss it lightly.

One Christian was asked by another quite aggressive Christian, "Are you saved?" The man answered "Yes, I am." "And when were you saved?" asked the first man. The second man said "When Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried, descended to hell, and on the third day, rose again." That is the correct answer, providing that you accept and believe in the one born to save us from our sins and bring us to eternal life. To say, "Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary" means that Jesus' coming brings us salvation.

"Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." Finally, these words tell us that Jesus' coming is a crisis.

Jesus' coming brought a crisis to Mary and Joseph. I wonder how long it took Mary to tell Joseph about her pregnancy. We humans hesitate to share bad or embarrassing news for as long as possible. You remember how Leafs' player Austin Matthews hid his summer foolishness in Arizona from Maple Leafs' management for months. Mary probably shared the news with Joseph only when she couldn't hide it any longer. "Pregnant!" Joseph exploded. "Pregnant! How can that be? We're not married yet, only engaged. We haven't been..." Joseph had to believe there was adultery on Mary's part. The story of how she became pregnant was too hard to believe. Joseph was faced with a crisis. He loved Mary, but as a righteous man he knew he had to follow the law's prescription for adultery.

Now he could have taken her before a public hearing where she would subject to harsh penalties, perhaps even stoning. But Joseph was a merciful man. He chose the option of ending their engagement quietly before two witnesses. He didn't want to expose Mary to any more public disgrace than necessary. There would enough as it was. As Joseph tossed and turned one night, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for her words are true. The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel commanded him; he took her

as his wife.” It wouldn’t matter what anyone thought. Joseph would obey the Lord. The coming of Jesus brought a crisis to Mary and Joseph, a crisis they never, ever forgot, and which followed them and Jesus all their lives.

Jesus’ coming brings a crisis to everyone. It requires each of us to make a decision of faith. Are we going to live in the days before his coming? Or are we going to live in the light of his incarnation, his saving work and his glorious promise to come again and make all things new? Are we going to live in the old age of Adam or in the new age of Jesus? Because of Jesus’ coming every person is now in one of two places. You are either with Jesus or you are not. You are either a redeemed child of God, an heir of eternal life, or you are bound for the place of eternal loss and perishing. You are either lost or you are found. There is no neutrality. Jesus’ coming brings a crisis.

Now the word crisis contains the nuance of both danger and opportunity. I know that most of here today are on Jesus’ side. But if you’re not there yet, this is your opportunity. Choose well. Say these words to God in the quietness of your heart, “Yes, I do believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son our Lord, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”