

December 11, 2016

The Faces of Christmas
Facing the Virgin Birth
Luke 1:26-34

Opening words: Today, I continue my sermon series, *The Faces of Christmas*. We are looking at the different faces in the story of Christmas. They were like us in many ways. Their lives were far from perfect. They faced challenges too, the same challenges we face today. In the past 2,000 years, our world has changed a great deal when it comes to transportation, communication and electronics, but the human condition remains the same. Two weeks ago, we looked at the most famous stepfather in history, Joseph. Last week, we looked at a couple with a fertility problem, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Today, we look at a pregnant teenage girl, Mary.

According to the scriptures, Jesus's home town was Nazareth. Through worldly eyes, there is nothing exceptional about it. It is never mentioned in the Old Testament. Even in New Testament times, it held no special value. Yet, God chose this insignificant place to make the greatest announcement in history. I have always marveled at the way God works. According to verse 26, the angel Gabriel went to Nazareth to tell a virgin named Mary that she is going to have a child. That announcement was hard for her to accept. Many still struggle with it. Honestly, I have never struggled with the virgin birth, because I believe God occasionally moves outside of natural law. This is the question you must answer today: Do you believe in the virgin birth? Our scripture reading for today is Luke 1:26-34. Let me call this message *Facing the Virgin Birth*.

Luke 1:26-34 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

One of the greatest preachers of all time, George Whitefield (1714-1770) once said, "Jesus was God and man in one person, that God and man might be happy together again." That is a great quote. If you think you can remember that quote, say, "Amen!"

It has been called one of the worst shows in the history of television; even I don't watch it. Yet, The Jerry Springer Show has been on for twenty-six seasons. That means someone is watching it. Are you a closet fan of The Jerry Springer Show? Springer is a lawyer and former politician who has taken the talk show format to an all-time low. I have never watched an episode, but I have seen the commercials. The show is about people who are ruled by their passions. People with no shame are brought in to tell their story. Their stories are always colorful, filled with bleeped profanity and out-of-control violence. The question is always the same. Is he the father of the baby? The answer comes as a great surprise. Sometimes the answer is "Yes" and the mother celebrates. Sometimes the answer is "No" and the "father" celebrates. I agree with the unknown critic. The Jerry Springer Show is one of the worst shows in the history of television. However, there is a link between The Jerry Springer Show and our Gospel lesson for today. The question must be answered: Who is the father of Mary's unwanted baby? The answer is hard to accept, because Mary was a virgin. If you have heard in the past that Mary was a virgin, say, "**Amen!**" Let us look at the Gospel lesson together.

Luke begins his Gospel by establishing his credibility (1:1-4). Then, he looks at the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5-25). We looked at part of that announcement last week. Today, we look at the announcement of the birth of Jesus (1:26-38). It is not a coincidence these two announcements stand together. The two stories have certain things in common. In both stories, a divine messenger is used to make the announcement. In both stories, a baby is conceived in a miraculous way. In both stories, the pregnancy is a great surprise. In both stories, a boy is conceived. In both stories, the babies grow up to be major characters in God's plan of salvation. There are several similarities in those stories, but there are also some major differences. Elizabeth was advanced in years. Mary was young. Many believe she was a young teenager. Elizabeth was sexually experienced. She had been married for many years. Mary was sexually inexperienced. As a matter of fact, Verse 27 tells us she was a virgin. Let me say it clearly. Mary had never had sex. Yet, her innocence did not prevent her pregnancy. It is hard to explain to our modern world. Mary illustrates for us the divine truth that we all know. With God, all things are possible. If you believe in the virgin birth, say, "**Amen!**" If you do, then you are not alone.

In 2013, the Pew Research Center reported that 73% of Americans believed Jesus was born to a virgin. If you are a numbers person, then you will find these numbers interesting.

78% of women believe in the virgin birth

69% of men believe in the virgin birth

71% of white Americans believe in the virgin birth

90% of black Americans believe in the virgin birth

78% of Hispanic Americans believe in the virgin birth

I find those numbers to be interesting because we can't agree on anything, but most Americans believe in the virgin birth. If you believe in the virgin birth, then you stand with approximately three-quarters of Americans who also agree with the virgin birth. Let me ask you again. If you believe in the virgin birth, then say, "**Amen!**"

You do the math. If 73% of Americans believe in the virgin birth, then 27% do not believe in the virgin birth. This group dismisses the virgin birth in several ways. Let me give you two. First, they take our Gospel lesson for today and redefine the word "virgin." To us, it means sexually innocent. To them, it means young girl. To them, Mary was just a young girl with an unwanted pregnancy. Second, others denounce the whole story. Some say the father of this baby was Joseph, who couldn't keep his hands to himself. Others say Mary was raped by a Roman soldier. Those theories sicken me. Those people simply do not understand the power of God. Your belief in the virgin birth is extremely important. If you don't believe in the virgin birth, then everything about our Christian theology changes. Consider these three thoughts with me:

First, if you don't believe in the virgin birth, then there is **no Biblical truth**. It turns the Bible into a book of lies, or at best folktales. Our Old Testament lesson for today is a good example. It came from Isaiah. The prophet lived approximately 700 years before the birth of Christ. Of all the prophets, he was the wordiest. Yet, of all of his words, our Old Testament lesson might be the most meaningful. Isaiah 7:14 says:

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Which means "God with us.")

If you don't believe in the virgin birth, then you don't believe those words. In an instant the entire Bible begins to unravel. The entire Bible loses its credibility. It is like the Genie escaping from the bottle. If Isaiah is wrong, then perhaps the entire Old Testament is wrong. If the Old Testament is wrong, then perhaps the New Testament is wrong. If the New Testament is wrong, then perhaps everything we know about Jesus is wrong. The Bible is the very foundation of the Christian faith. Without the Bible, without Jesus, we are hopelessly lost, knowing nothing about eternity. I am thankful that the Bible isn't a fairytale. It is the inspired word of God. If you are thankful for the Bible, say, "**Amen!**" If you don't believe in the virgin birth, there there is no Biblical truth.

Two weeks from today is Christmas. You know the truth. There is a secular and a sacred side of Christmas. The secular side is filled with cards and gifts. It is filled with decorations and seasonal music. It is filled with laughter and parties. I have nothing against the secular side of Christmas. It is fun. However, there is also the sacred side of Christmas. Only one thing matters on the sacred side of Christmas, Jesus! Think about

this for a moment: When Mary looked into the face of her newborn, she was looking at the very face of God. I find that to be extremely humbling. God left the perfection of heaven to become one of us. There is only one reason why, LOVE! Martin Luther once said, *"The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding."* He is correct. Listen to what I am about to say. This is the second thought: If you don't believe in the virgin birth, then there is **no Incarnation**. In other words, God stayed in heaven. If Joseph, or another man, was the biological father of Jesus, then Jesus is fully human. That fact changes everything. If you are thankful God became one of us, say, **"Amen!"** If you don't believe in the virgin birth, then there is no Biblical truth. If you don't believe in the virgin birth, then you don't believe in the Incarnation. Let me give you one more thought.

Third, if you don't believe in the virgin birth, then there is **no salvation**. Jesus's sacrificial death was complete because he was the son of God. If Jesus was simply the son of a man, then his work on the cross would be incomplete. The death of Jesus was complete because he was the son of God. We are saved by grace and by grace alone. You can't earn your salvation; it is beyond our reach. Salvation is a gift from God. If you are thankful that Jesus's trip to the cross was complete, say, **"Amen!"**

Within the world of United Methodism there is something called itineracy. This is not a call system, like the Baptist or the Presbyterian Churches. United Methodist ministers are appointed one year at a time by a bishop. I am constancy reminded that I am itinerant and I have been appointed here for twenty-three consecutive years. I am assuming, I will be appointed for a twenty-fourth consecutive year in July. Some churches, especially smaller membership congregations, seem to get a new pastor every two years. Unlike us, those churches understand the process. We are ignorant of the process. Once the church has been officially notified their pastor is leaving, the District Superintendent contacts the church to tell them about their new pastor and an introduction is arranged. Let me say it again. It is not an interview, it is an introduction. The committee holds little power. The bishop holds all the power. The new pastor will come with family in tow and meet representatives of their new church. It is a time to get to know the new pastor, so questions are asked. Some questions are predictable. How old are your children? Have you ever lived in this area? Is your spouse planning on working? Does your spouse play the piano? You can ask any question you desire of the new pastor but one. I remember the story.

Years ago, in the Cleveland area, a committee was being introduced to their new pastor. Everyone was having a great time until the forbidden question was asked, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" The District Superintendent didn't let the new pastor answer the question. Do you know why the virgin birth question is forbidden? One of the reasons is control, but one of the other reasons is that no church wants a pastor

who doesn't believe in the virgin birth. If you don't believe in the virgin birth, then everything changes. Let me say it clearly. I believe in the virgin birth. I believe in the virgin birth because I need Biblical truth. I believe in the virgin birth because I believe in the Incarnation, when God became one of us. I believe in the virgin birth because I need a Savior. The question is not if I believe in the virgin birth. The question is, do you believe?

Will you pray with me?