

THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Genesis 1:1-5

Luke 1:26-38

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on December 20, 2020, the Fourth Sunday of Advent at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

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.

I.

Two weeks ago, I preached a sermon entitled “Why No Christmas?” in which I speculated as to why Mark did not include any reference to the birth of Christ in his Gospel.¹ Today I want to turn our attention to Luke, who shows a lot of interest in that birth.

Specifically, I want to explore one aspect of the birth of Christ that both Luke and Matthew share: namely, the Virgin Birth. This is the belief that Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb, as Matthew says, before she and Joseph had “marital relations,” or as Mary herself says in Luke before she has “known a man.”

I have entitled this sermon “The Biography of the Virgin Birth,” because like any influential idea or person, much is packed into its long life. Indeed, it has a varied history within and outside of Christianity.

¹ Larry R. Hayward, “Why No Christmas?” a sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, VA 12/6/23. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W19EWvwVMok&list=PLMXHzGrIA2Jp_1biuw-hGSLhziKcGUzWT&index=2.

- First, along with Creation, the divinity of Christ, and the resurrection of the body, the Virgin Birth is one of the Biblical depictions about God which proves to be a stumbling block for many people. Extraordinary occurrences are hard for many to accept, because by definition they occur outside the *constructs* of *testing* and *verification*, outside the standards of *certainty* and *proof* to which we proudly hold. Thus, the Virgin Birth serves as an obstacle to faith for many.
- Within the community of believers, the Virgin Birth can also be a stumbling block because it seems to imply that those who take vows of chastity or asceticism are on a higher spiritual plane than those who affirm sexuality as one of God’s many good gifts. To accept the Virgin Birth, it seems, is to hold up as a moral ideal something that is neither desirable by many nor possible for most. Such idealization can divide us into the *more spiritual* and *less spiritual*, the *more holy* and *less holy*. And for Protestants for whom “the priesthood of all believers” is important, such division is hard to countenance.
- In addition, in the early twentieth century, as the movement called Fundamentalism developed and was codified within many Protestant denominations, the Virgin Birth was included as one of “Five Fundamentals” considered *essential* for Christians to believe.² Yet such essentialism seems out of character for a doctrine included in only one chapter of Matthew and one chapter of Luke and not mentioned by Mark, John, or the Apostle Paul.

II.

But that is enough historical theology for the Sunday before Christmas. What can the Virgin Birth mean to us today? How can its biography live and breathe among us in a positive and beautiful way in our day, in our time?

What I am going to say today some of you will have heard from when I preached on this in 2014,³ and others will have heard in my New Testament classes. But I invite all of you to follow as we walk down a path I find beautiful every time we walk it.

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In Genesis 1:1-2 we read:

In the beginning
 When God created the heavens and the earth,
 The earth was a *formless void*
 And darkness *covered* the face of the deep,
 While a *wind from God*
 Swept over the face of the waters.

In Luke 1:35, we read, as the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary:

The Holy Spirit will *come upon* you,
 And the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you...

² The others were the inerrancy of the Bible; the [literal nature of biblical accounts](#), particularly the Genesis creation story and the miracles of Christ; the bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ; and And the [substitutionary atonement](#) of Christ on the cross, an understanding of his death as appeasing the wrath of God toward our sin for which Christ took God’s punishment in our place. See Ernest Robert Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

³ See Larry R. Hayward, “Overshadowed,” a sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia 12/21/14.

In the poetic affirmation of our Creation in Genesis, the word for “wind” is *ruach* and is also translated “spirit.” Likewise, the word translated in Genesis as “swept over” comes from the same root as the word Luke translates as “overshadow.”

Thus, another way of reading the Creation Story is:

In the beginning
When God created the heavens and the earth,
The earth was a *formless void*
And darkness *covered* the face of the deep,
While the Spirit of God
Was *overshadowing*
The face of the waters.

At Creation, the Spirit of God *overshadows* the watery chaos – whose Hebrew word is *tohuwabohu* – and brings forth life. Likewise, in the Incarnation, the Spirit of God *overshadows* the watery chaos of Mary’s womb and brings forth life. Creation and Incarnation. Creation and Christ. All because of the activity of the Spirit *overshadowing*, creating life, the life which in Genesis God labels “very good” and which in Luke the angel labels “holy...the Son of God.”⁴

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Is there anything more worthy of our wonder and worship than this?

Is there anything more beautiful than this marriage of Creation and Incarnation?

The Spirit of God hovering, brooding, sweeping over, overshadowing the watery chaos at Creation.

That same Spirit hovering, brooding, sweeping over, overshadowing the watery chaos of Mary’s womb, and creating within it the Holy Child, the redeemer of the world, the One who would

- heal our maladies
- sow parables like seeds
- gather children around him
- face the power of evil and give his life in battle overcoming it
- descend into hell
- rise from the grave
- ascend into heaven
- leave his Spirit with us always
- and promise to return in glory, beauty, justice, and peace?

Is there anything more beautiful to behold than this Child being created by the Spirit of God in the watery womb of his mother, just as God created the heavens and the earth out of the watery chaos at Creation?

Who can argue *with* such beauty? *Why* argue with such beauty?

⁴ See Raymond M. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1977), 314-316.

III.

Most of us cannot wait the eleven more days until 2020 draws to a close; and we hope that the flip of the calendar will make a difference.

About the time you received the update on Pastor Whitney Friday afternoon, we received word that one of the rehabilitation programs to which we were hopeful she could transfer did not come through; but there are others, and we are not deterred. A few hours later we received, almost at the same time, word of two children, from two different families in the church, both at Inova Fairfax Hospital for matters serious. We will be remembering them in our prayer in a few minutes. And we cannot wait for the flip of the calendar. But there is still beauty.

Whitney was freed from her fourteen-day COVID quarantine at Woodbine and able to receive her first visitor since November 22nd. It was a twenty minute “window visit” of the one such visit she is allowed each week. With her as the patient on one side of a glass wall and the visitor on the other side talking through a phone hookup, she expected it to be like a prison visit. “But it was so much better than I thought,” she said. “So much better.”

The Spirit still hovers, overshadows.

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Last Sunday after worship, I answered a request of Darlene Johnson and her daughters to visit their husband and father Dick in their home. Dick was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in August of 2019. He has not left their large Victorian home on King Street for six months, and with its twelve-foot ceilings and large, airy rooms, I felt it would be relatively safe to make the first pastoral visit I have made inside a parishioner’s home since COVID.

While his body is weakening, his mind remains clear; and we had a warm, poignant, albeit short visit. At the end, he held up a small, brown Bible, whose cover was flaking like pie crust. Its pages had yellowed, and thin yellowed strips of corners served as bookmarks for two passages.

“This Bible was given to my wife when she was a child,” he said.

“Do you have a special passage you would like me to read?” expecting him to say, “The Twenty-Third Psalm.”

Instead, he said “Psalm Twenty-Seven” as his fingers removed the frail bookmark and he handed me the open Bible.

About a third the way through the Psalm we came to this stanza:

One thing I asked of the Lord,
That will I seek after:
To live in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To behold the *beauty* of the Lord,
And to inquire in his temple.⁵

⁵ Psalm 27:4.

He was praying a prayer for beauty. The Spirit still hovers, overshadows.

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I shared with you recently that I just completed Marilynne Robinson's newly-released novel *Jack*. Its poignant beauty led me to return to her earlier, Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*.⁶ When I read it fifteen years ago, I had marked many of its passages; one I had marked, but I lost to memory, stood out when I re-read it this week.

In it, Reverend John Ames, an aging Iowa pastor, is writing a letter to the young son who has been born to him several years earlier when, after decades of widowhood, he married a woman thirty-four years his junior. Ames writes the letter, which constitutes the whole book, because he knows he won't be alive when his sons begin to want to get to know him.

He describes what it was like to live through the flu epidemic of 1918:

People don't talk much now about the Spanish influenza, but that was a terrible thing, and it struck just at the time of the Great War, just when we were getting involved in it. It killed the soldiers by the thousands, healthy men in the prime of life, and then it spread into the rest of the population. . . . People came to church wearing masks, if they came at all. They'd sit as far from each other as they could. There was talk that the Germans had caused it with some sort of secret weapon. . . . It was just like a biblical plague exactly. I thought of Sennacherib.

It was a strange sickness. I saw it over at Fort Riley. . . . I went over there to help out, and I saw it myself. . . . So I wrote a sermon about it. I said, or I meant to say, that these deaths . . . were a sign and a warning to the rest of us that the desire for war would bring the consequences of war..

It was quite a sermon, I believe. . . . But my courage failed, because I knew the only people at church would be a few old women who were already about as sad and apprehensive as they could stand to be and no more approving of the war than I was. And they were there even though I might have been contagious. I seemed ridiculous to myself for imagining I could thunder from the pulpit in those circumstances, and I dropped the sermon in the stove and preached on the Parable of the Lost Sheep. . . . But Mirabelle Mercer was not Pontius Pilate, and she was not Woodrow Wilson either.

. . . You would never have imagined that almost empty sanctuary, just a few women there with heavy veils on to try to hide the masks they were wearing, and two or three men. I preached with a scarf around my mouth for more than a year. Everyone smelled like onions, because word went around that flu germs were killed by onions. People rubbed themselves down with tobacco leaves.

In those days there were barrels on the street corners so we could contribute peach pits to the war effort. The army made them into charcoal, they said, for the filters in gas masks. It took hundreds of pits to make just one of them. So we all ate peaches on the grounds of patriotism, which actually made them taste a little different. The magazines were full of soldiers wearing gas masks, looking stranger than we did. It was a remarkable time.

Most of the young men seemed to feel that the war was a courageous thing, and maybe new wars have come along since I wrote this that have seemed brave to you. That there have been wars I have no doubt.

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), 41-43.

I believe that plague was a great sign to us, and we refused to see it and take its meaning, and since then we have had war continuously.

On one level, there is beauty in this lengthy *excerpt*:

- A few people, sitting apart in a sanctuary, wearing masks, yet still gathered to worship
- A minister preaching
- Courageous young men enlisting to fight for their country during war, and citizens responding by saving the pits of peaches.

But there is moral searching in this passage as well:

- Townspeople wondering if the epidemic is the result of a conspiracy or plot by a foreign enemy
- The minister wondering if the epidemic is God's punishment of the people for their misguided entry into a war
- His hesitance to share his views. perhaps out of pastoral respect for the grief they had known in their loss of their sons to that war in which they had enlisted, perhaps out of his own hope that God no longer expressed his divine displeasure through the sending of plagues.

All part of the human struggle and desire to turn to the church to know the will of God, and the church's struggle to have an inkling of what that will might be, so as to be able to respond and share it.

There is beauty in this *struggle* and that *turning*. The Spirit hovers over the whole affair – the sacred time for worship, the sacred space – even in pandemic, even in masked worship, even the yearning for the flip of the calendar. Perhaps the heavenly host singing “Glory to God in the highest” forms a canopy, a mask over the manger under which the Spirit – protected – hovers over the Child, upon those who worship him.

Amen.

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