

Manteca Presbyterian Church

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Surprises

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Luke 1:26-38

26 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

New International Version

Introduction – Christmas is About Surprises

Christmas is about surprises. Think about the biggest surprise you've ever had for Christmas. Anybody ever get a car? A baby? Think about it, why do we wrap presents or put them in colorful gift bags? It's for the surprise factor. Christmas is about surprises. And it all started with the birth of a baby to a good, upstanding but unwed unsuspecting couple and God's surprises haven't stopped. That's what God does. God is a God of surprises. Today I want to challenge us to be on the lookout for God's surprises in our ordinary day to day life.

The Virgin Birth

So we start with this surprise virgin birth. Is that even scientifically possible? You might be surprised to know that there's actually very little mention of the virgin birth in the Bible apart from a few verses in Matthew and Luke. Apparently it wasn't that big a thing when it happened. It actually wasn't even a big thing until the fourth century after Christ when the church affirmed the virgin birth in the Nicene Creed at a time when the role of women had become greatly diminished because of Rome and sex came to be seen as something dirty and immoral. If sex was seen as something dirty, then a pure savior couldn't be the result of an impure, dirty action like sex. So they started promoting that Jesus wasn't the result of a sexual encounter. But we have to realize that this view of women and sex is not the view of the New Testament.

So was Jesus born of a virgin or not and does it matter? To be born to a virgin would clearly have taken a miracle. And what exactly is a miracle? We use the term so lightly these days. For example, one might say something like the 49ers winning the Super Bowl would be a miracle. Well, it would be but not by the criteria for a biblical miracle. A biblical miracle was when the laws of nature are suspended. For example, when Abraham's wife Sarah was elderly, God promised them a child. But how could that happen? We all know the laws of aging defy childbirth after a certain age. The miracle was that the laws of nature, which says aging bodies can't give birth, were temporarily

suspended when Abraham's wife Sarah became pregnant and had a son. This sort of miracle happened in numerous places in the Old Testament.

When Jesus performed miracles such as healing the blind or the lame or multiplying food he always started with the natural ingredients like eyes that didn't work and legs that couldn't stand or some loaves of bread and a few fish that he multiplied. Jesus never gave a leg to a person who had no leg. He didn't, as one of the forgotten gospels that didn't make it into the Bible attest, make birds out of clay that flew away. Jesus always functioned within the realm of God's creation and his miracles were a suspension of the laws of nature that we know. Jesus never created something out of nothing, whether it be food or legs. The only exception would be when he turned water into wine seemingly without grapes and that only happened one.

But the virgin birth story doesn't function within the same realm of God suspending the laws of nature. For this to happen, God would have had to create and place in Mary, male seed. Wouldn't that be the equivalent of giving someone without a leg, a leg. That wouldn't be consistent with the miracle stories of the Bible other than the original creation story and turning water into wine but remember, God can do all things so it's possible.

Yet in the only two places where the birth of Jesus is mentioned doesn't actually say he was born of a virgin. Read Luke 1:30-31 again *“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.*

What should be a bigger problem for us is how Mary, who was still single but engaged, became pregnant and that that wasn't a bigger moral scandal than it was. Jewish women in ancient Israel were passed from one male authority (their fathers) to another (their husbands) at a young age. Most were betrothed or engaged by the time they were thirteen and married by fourteen. With such early marriages, premarital sex was most likely not that common, but it did happen as we can see by the laws set in place in the

Old Testament and the punishments meted out for breaking them. Here are some examples:

If a man marries a girl who is claimed to be a virgin, and then finds that she is not, “they shall bring the girl to the entrance of her father’s house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death” (Deut. 22:20)

If a man has relations within the walls of a city with a maiden who is betrothed, “you shall bring them both out to the gate of the city and there stone them to death.” (Deut. 22:23) but if they were in the open fields, “the man alone shall die”, because if it was in the open fields, “though the betrothed maiden may have cried out for help, there was no one to come to her aid.” (Deut. 22:25-27)

If the maiden in question is not betrothed, the punishment is different. “The man who had relations with her shall pay the girl’s father fifty silver shekels and take her as his wife, because he has deflowered her. Moreover, he may not divorce her as long as he lives.” (Deut. 22:29)

Mary would have known these verses and the punishment she faced—stoning. For her defense, all she would have had was the testimony of this angel. Would you have believed your daughter when she was a teenager if she told you she was pregnant because of an angel. And her boyfriend Joseph would have had a duty to expose her sin and witness her execution.

A Single, Engaged Young Woman

But again, this is Christmas and Christmas is about what? Surprises. So think about Mary’s surprise when the angel first talked to her. Her initial reaction was something like, “You don’t know what you are talking about. I’m still a virgin.” But here’s something to think about, if God had chosen an already pregnant and married woman, the story would have been very different. If God had chosen a single woman not engaged to be married, this story would have been even more different. Regardless of what you believe about the virgin birth, if the virgin birth isn’t true you’d have to agree that God

was very specific in choosing someone who was an engaged virgin. Why? Think about that this week.

The angel Gabriel assured her that what was going to happen to her was the work of the Holy Spirit. How did he assure her? We're not sure but he referenced her relative Elizabeth, in her old age, also having a child as well. He referenced a miracle. So she knew something unusual was happening.

Mary surely would have thought that her fiancé Joseph wouldn't put up with public disgrace of having his girlfriend pregnant. But surprise, surprise, the angel appeared to him as well and told him also not to fear. Do you see what a great surprise Christmas is, even from the start? Everything about it is a surprise.

Conclusion

Once you get over Mary's troubling circumstances of being pregnant before she was married, virgin birth or otherwise, this whole thing is really kind of casual and domestic. What's more natural than the birth of a child? The babe in Bethlehem always appears to be less than he really is. He's a child born in poverty and obscurity. He's a simple boy of Nazareth, rambunctious and learning the trade of carpentry alongside his father. He's unnoticed for years while living in a family of little means. He's not a member of the upper religious class but a self styled preacher like John the Baptist. He becomes a prisoner refusing to answer the accusations of a judge. He's buried and except for a few fanatics who follow him, is dead and forgotten. He is so natural. So like any other human on earth.

And then comes the surprise of Christmas, this child was actually God with us. That's what the word "Emmanuel" means. I love the way the Apostle John describes it in John 1. "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*" John was saying in a sense that God pitched his tent among us in the flesh of Jesus Christ, the possibility that no one thought possible, the

identity that no one identified, the divinity that no one divined, was made possible at Christmas. Jesus was not only human but divine.

Now don't miss this. If you miss this you miss Christmas. Gabriel the angel assured Mary that Jesus will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. Jesus was a boy like every other boy who has ever lived. He may have gotten sick like other children. He may have fallen and scraped his knee like other children. He had to learn to be a carpenter alongside his father like any other son of a carpenter. He laughed like every other boy and grew in wisdom and stature. He was 100% boy. But here is the surprise of Christmas: He was also 100% God. 100% boy and 100% God. That's crucial. The church has been careful throughout the centuries to point this out. He is not 50% God and 50% human like some of the pagan religions. He is all boy and all God. That's the mystery but it's also the surprise of Christmas. If a surprise is how the first Christmas started, why else would that change now?

So this is what I want you to do. Expect some surprises in the new year! Don't be disappointed if the surprise comes in an ugly package that you don't initially like, like some bad news you might hear. Mary's news at first of being pregnant before she was married couldn't have been seen as good. But look at the bigger picture that God loves you so much and is definitely doing something bigger in your life. Surprises are good things when they come from that Someone who really loves us. But you also might be a good surprise to someone else. Try being a good surprise to someone and you may be surprised at how God breaks through your world as you're surprising someone else. Christmas, the season of surprises.

TO LEARN MORE

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal

Romans 3:23-24

2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death

Romans 6:23

3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us

Romans 5:8

4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life

Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."