

Sermon: "Trusting in the Promises"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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## DAZZLED

Last week I watched a re-enactment of the Christmas story done by the children and young people of El Buen Vecino. (For those of you who may be visiting, this is a Hispanic Presbyterian Church that is sharing our facilities while they are trying to recover from the hurricanes.)

The first scene in their play, the angel announced to Mary that she would have a child who would be God's own son. The little girl who played Mary looked to be about 10 years old, and the youngster who played the angel was a very tall teen-ager or a young adult whose features were entirely hidden by a large white robe.

The little girl was a good actor. She seemed overwhelmed by the announcement of the coming birth, and her small stature made her seem even more vulnerable in the presence of this huge, overpowering angel. The fact that the familiar story was being told in Spanish made it all seem all the more mysterious to me, and in a way, that helped me hear the story in a new way.

Professor Walter Bruggeman commented on this aspect of the text when he wrote, "... the first thing to notice as we move in these last days to Christmas is that the expectation of Jesus, according to Matthew, is outside all of our normal categories. Our business is not to explain this text. Our business is to be dazzled at Christmastime that something is happening beyond all of our calculations. This is a baby and a wonder and a gift that is designed to move us beyond ourselves."

Sometimes I think that because the Christmas story is so familiar we are unable to visualize what a mysterious and frightening experience it must have been for all involved.

## SERIOUS ENGAGEMENT

According to most commentaries, when Mary learned that she would have this special child she wasn't much older than the little girl who played Mary in the play, maybe somewhere between 12 and 14 years of age. Joseph was probably older, somewhere between 18 and 20 years of age.

And these two young people were engaged. In those days, the parents arranged the marriage and with the consent of the future bride and groom, there was a one-year engagement period before the marriage.

Now this engagement period was taken very seriously. Though the couple did not live together as husband and wife, the commitment was just as binding as a marriage. And it was even necessary to obtain a "divorce" if, for some reason, the couple could not go through with the marriage.

Joseph definitely had a reason not to go through with the marriage. You can imagine Joseph's feelings when he learned that Mary was pregnant. It sounds all nice and holy when we read it in the Bible. Mary was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

But, that is not what Joseph thought, at least not at first! Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly so as not to subject her to public disgrace.

## A DIVINE ENCOUNTER

And that's when Joseph had his divine encounter. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,

"Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife.  
The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Now I know that Joseph was a rube from Galilee, but you have to think that he wouldn't believe that explanation, even if it did come from an angel!

But, he did believe. Joseph believed because he came from a people who looked at the world in a different way. They looked at the world through the eyes of faith.

God's people believed that sometimes there was more to life than meets the eye. They believed that there were signs of promise all around if only a person had "eyes to see and ears to hear." They believed that God could send His salvation in the most unlikely ways, even in the birth of a baby to a young unmarried girl.

#### A SIGN

The angel informed Joseph that such was the case with this young girl, Mary. The baby would be a sign of divine intervention into the affairs of the world. In fact, His name would come to symbolize the essence of divinity. The baby's name would be Jesus, which means in Hebrew, "God is salvation." It would be an appropriate name for the child because He would come to "save his people from their sins."

Joseph undoubtedly knew the story from the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah once spoke of a young woman or a virgin who would conceive and bear a child. His name would be Emmanuel which means "God is with us." (Isaiah 7:14) This Scripture had always captured the imagination of the Jewish people. They wondered if perhaps this puzzling passage might refer to the coming of the Messiah.

Now Joseph believed that the promises of Scripture had been fulfilled. Somehow God had decided to enter the world through the birth of this child. Joseph awoke from his dream, and trusted in the promise of the angel instead of listening to his own fears. He did as the angel commanded. He took Mary as his wife, and when the child was born, Joseph named him Jesus.

#### CAN WE BELIEVE?

Joseph's role in God's plan was merely to believe and accept. And Joseph did just that. The question for us this morning is this, "Can we believe and accept what God's will for us? Do we have a dream about what God is doing in our lives?"

Let me be honest with you. There are many people who have trouble with this idea of a virgin birth. Joseph may have believed the dream, but many people in the modern world are very skeptical. Maybe some of you are skeptical.

We can understand someone being hesitant on this point. What thinking person has not been troubled when this story is told each year? The story should trouble us just as it troubled Mary and Joseph when they first heard it. The story should make us afraid and ask questions because it is still a story that brings with it a sense of mystery and awe.

Each week we repeat a creed that has in it the affirmation, Jesus was "conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary." Why did the early church think this belief was so important that it should be included in the church's most basic statement of faith?

#### NOT ABOUT BIOLOGY

Let me say, first of all, believing that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary is not just a matter of accepting something because we are "supposed" to believe it. It's true, of course, that God can do anything, and that includes changing the rules of biology to suit His plan.

But, what difference would it make if there were a birth that broke all the rules way back when? It would make no difference. Ripley's Believe It or Not is filled with strange things that we can't explain. And, as far as I know, nobody ever came to faith because of Ripley's Believe It or Not. As my grandfather used to say, "I would rather not believe it."

And no one has come to faith because Jesus was born in a miraculous way either. The Bible tells us that the miraculous birth of Jesus was merely a sign of something greater to come.

## GOD IS WITH US

The miraculous birth of Jesus was about a promise for the whole world. God is not out to get us. God is out to save us from our sin. God is not an absentee landlord who created this marvelous universe and then said, "Good luck kids. I'm going somewhere else." No, according to message given to Joseph, "God is with us."

That's what the Virgin Birth means and that's why it's as important to us today as it was to Joseph then. When we talk about the birth of Jesus, we talk about the fact that God chose to reveal himself in frail human form.

And God is still doing that. The Spirit of Christ is still among us birthing new possibilities in a broken and sinful world. The Spirit of God in Christ still manifests Himself in the warmth of human touch. Just as God was in Christ so God is with us here and now. It is a great comfort and a great mystery.

## WHAT SONG DO YOU SING?

Bette Midler popularized a song entitled, "From A Distance." The song suggests that from a distance the world looks better. One of the lines from that song reads,

"From a distance,  
We all have enough,  
and no one is in need.  
And there are no guns,  
No bombs and no disease,  
No hungry mouths to feed.  
From a distance.

And the chorus goes, "God is watching. God is watching. From a distance."

This is the view many people have in God. If God is involved at all with the world, it is in a very inconsequential way. God is watching from a distance. God is not involved in or even interested in the affairs of women and men.

And so we follow this disinterested God by imitating Him. We too place ourselves at a distance from people and the pain of the world. We suggest that it will all work out, even out over time. No need for us to dirty our hands with the real problems of life.

But, Christians believe that Bette's song is wrong. We may not feel God's presence. We may stumble in many ways. But, we believe God is never distant from us. God is not watching from a distance. God is with us.

And so, instead of singing Bette Midler's "From a Distance" we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The last line of that hymn goes,

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel."

## LONGING FOR A CHILD

Perhaps one reason Christmas captures the imagination of so many people is that the sign of a child is so powerful. A fellow pastor told of his wife becoming pregnant, finally, after a long wait. He said,

"The hoped for, longed for dream became reality."  
Though the fall she grew bigger, great with child as Matthew would have put it, and as the December days grew short and cold, they watched this 'mystery of mysteries unfold.'

His wife was in the choir that year. They were singing John Peterson's cantata, Love Transcending. She said that sometimes she caught herself singing for the baby in her womb, rather than for Mary's baby.

And on the night of the cantata when she processed with the choir, she knew that she was on her way to Bethlehem. When the lector spoke of Mary being "blessed among women," the minister's wife said Gabriel was speaking to her.

She rejoiced along with Elizabeth and Mary as they talked about the advent of their babies, and the pastor said, "That December, we found that there is no better time than Advent, when the whole world waits for a baby."

What better sign of salvation could God give us than the sign of a baby? Have you ever noticed how the appearance of a new born baby in a room can change the whole atmosphere? Most everyone wants to hold her, and even the most hardened heart is softened by such a tender miracle.

#### TURNED AROUND BY A BABY

There was a man who said that he kept his marriage vows rather loosely, thought little about the past and had not the slightest interest in the future. He spent the first years of his marriage mainly on the road making money.

"But, one night," he said, "I got turned around, the night I walked into the hospital room and held my little baby in my arms for the first time and realized that she was a part of me even if she was better than I deserved. I said to myself,

'You're going to have to stop your foolishness and start living like somebody because she's somebody.'"

#### GENERAL PICKETT'S BABY

The great preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick told the story of General Pickett's baby. During the last days of the Civil War, the Confederates fought with the Union forces outside Richmond. It was the cruelest time of the war.

Then one night the confederate lines were lighted with bonfires, and the Union guards discovered that the Southern troops were celebrating General Pickett's newborn baby. The word of its arrival had just reached the army.

General Grant was so moved by the event that he ordered the Union lines to help the Confederates celebrate this baby by lighting up the scene with additional bonfires. The next day Grant's officers sent a graceful letter through the lines under a flag of truce, communicating to General Pickett the congratulations of his enemies!

For a moment at least the insanity and slaughter had stopped. Good will and peace prevailed, all because of the birth of a baby.

I wonder. Could the insane wars be stopped in the same way? Instead of focusing on our fears and hatred, what if we focused on the Divine sign, the birth of a baby, a sign of our common humanity and a sign of God's presence with us today? How might we be different if we really believed that the "hopes and fears of all the years" are answered in the birth of that child?

I do believe. I believe that the birth of Jesus was and is a sign of salvation.

The birth of a baby often calls forth the best in us. New birth can cause a man or woman to be reborn.

The Bible tells us that it is a sign of an even greater miracle.

The minister's wife was right you know.

The Christmas story is about us, not just those of us who wait for a child to be born but for all of us who need a Savior during this cold and dark time.

Hear again the Good News. God himself is with us. He comes to save us from our sins.

Amen.

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