

June 19, 2016 **“Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary”**

Luke 1:26-38

The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore MD

“It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...” Now, that might sound a little odd to us now, (besides the sound of my singing voice), but considering that it comes in the midst of our Summer Sermon Series on the Apostle’s Creed, with the conception and birth of Jesus as our theme for the day, it makes perfect sense.

Although it may sound off-topic for these days in which we live, still reeling after another deadly mass shooting, this time in Orlando, and in the midst of a tempestuous Presidential Campaign, our getting back to the basics of our faith is one of the best things we can do. We remember the script we’re living from, written by the God who is the author of all our lives.

Today we start with the new beginning that God began with us in Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, born in a manger; the real ‘reason for the season’ as they say in December. So perhaps today, in June, six months removed from the hustle & bustle of the holidays, away from the incessant to-do lists we will all carry around with us one way or another, gifts to buy, parties to attend, or alternately, the people we so miss and the longing and emptiness that we experience, we can now take a different view of these holy events as written in the Creed.

Today we may be better able to take a step back and see Advent and Christmas in a different light; what the holidays really mean to us as God uses that special time for reason.

So, let me ask: what does Christmas really mean to you? What is the season all about?

It is more than singing Silent Night by candlelight, isn’t it? (Though that is always a pretty sweet moment, in and of itself.)



Here are some general statements I think we can all agree on about the Christmas season.

- It's a time for us to let God come into our hearts anew.
- It's a time to share gifts freely, in the same way that God gives Jesus to us... no strings attached.
- It's a time to remember Christmases gone by, reenacting how it is that God arrives in our lives through the gifts of the presence of others, family and dear friends.

Now with that being said, we still need to go back to the words of the Creed, to see what these pivotal statements we so often repeat by rote memory are really all about.

The Methodist theologian Justo Gonzalez says that these two clauses, “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary” are less biological statements than they are Spiritual, special and real. That is to say, taken in the context of their meaning in the ancient world, both of these phrases had some important differences from what they mean to us now. Let's begin with conception.

In the Bible there are numerous accounts of women who could not get pregnant who then, later surprisingly conceived so that God's purposes could be fulfilled. From Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, there are numerous examples of women who experienced unexpected but welcome pregnancies and bore children of promise and fame.

This ‘formula’ also applies to numerous other well-known male Biblical figures with less well-known mothers: Samson, the prophet Samuel and John the Baptist.

The facts are that conception in the ancient world was understood differently than today. The ‘birds and the bees’ operated differently, or so they thought. Ancients believed that conception was the result of the male seed being planted in the womb, much like a grain of wheat is planted in the ground. The mother did not contribute the ovum – of which the ancients were unaware- and a womb was simply the mold in which the offspring was nourished and shaped. According to the biology of the times, the beginning of a human life was understood quite differently. Thus, St. Augustine could say that in hearing the angel Gabriel's message, Mary conceived through the ear, and we might better understand what he meant. So, in light of this, the saying from John's Gospel, “The Word became Flesh” takes on new meaning for sure.

For the earliest Christians, steeped in scripture far more than biology (unlike us), conception by the Holy Spirit was simply a tried and true formula of how an exceptional child whose life would be dedicated to the Lord would come into this world.

Strange as it might seem to us now, this was a straightforward and non-controversial claim about conception for that day and time. There could well have been much more grandiose claims made about the circumstances of Jesus' birth, considering the mythologies of other ancient religions of the day.

There were alternative temptations to turn Jesus into a demigod, which would have undermined any claim of the true humanity, compassion and understanding that God actually brought in Christ.

By over-emphasizing the uniqueness of Jesus' holy birth, it would have been far too simple for people to view him as some kind of new Perseus, the greatest hero of Greek mythology and earthly father of Hercules, who was said to have been fathered by Zeus, descended from Mt. Olympus. Had Jesus been understood as a demigod, he wouldn't and couldn't have been fully human, couldn't have been tempted, couldn't have been hungry, couldn't have suffered at all, or even died, for that matter.

There were also others present in the early Christian movement (Marcion, by name), who claimed that Jesus was not born at all, but rather was a phantom, a spirit who only *appeared* to be a real, flesh and blood human being. Marcion specifically denied Jesus' actual birth and claimed that Jesus' body was only an imitation of a material body. He affirmed many of Jesus' moral teachings, but not his personhood. (Sounds odd to us, but so it was.)

So the fact that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary is a statement that points not so much to Jesus' divinity, but rather his humanity... that Jesus was *born* by a woman in the first place was not a statement to be trifled with. For those who would want to quibble with the actual intent of the Creed, the clause might better read "born of Mary, the virgin."

The other side of the coin of Jesus' birth by Mary is that his earthly father, Joseph, is not mentioned at all. In many ways Joseph is a 'Silent partner'; cooperative, but not instrumental.

This is not news to us, but made a very clear social statement; a scandal even, that the holy Child of God should be born in such a circumstance. Jesus may well have had to

endure an upbringing where some townsfolk in Nazareth questioned his legitimacy. Even being called the Son of Mary (which we take for granted) – and not ‘son of Joseph’- which would have been the customary way to put it, infers that Jesus surely had to endure some questions about his birth, right from the beginning.

So what all this means when we sing: “*It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...*” is that there’s far more going on in Jesus’ birth than we ever have time to pay attention to in December.

There’s more depth and meaning to appreciate than we normally consider. And when the theology of all this turns into practice, it goes to another level altogether. Life changed unalterably after the message of Jesus’ birth became widely celebrated and new norms were adopted.

Two examples will suffice. In ancient Greek and Roman societies, infanticide was widely practiced. Illegitimate, deformed or unwanted babies were customarily left out in the elements to die. Often it was the decision of the ‘paterfamilias’ whether to accept an infant into the fold of the family or not. The circumstances of Jesus’ birth, combined with the gradual, widespread growth of Christianity began to change that custom, and by 374 AD the practice of infanticide was outlawed in Rome. The claim that God took on human flesh and dwelt among us made a real difference in understanding God’s love for all humanity, changing how people regarded even the least of these in Christian community, from infants to the aged.

The other example of societal change, taking a cue from Jesus’ birth story, concerns the role of refugees. Not stated in the Creed, but very much a part of the Biblical account, is the fact that Joseph and Mary both traveled from their hometown when Jesus was born and had to flee their country shortly after his birth because of death threats from King Herod. These things didn’t happen by accident.

So it was also that early Christians made the practice of welcome; taking in strangers- in the long-standing tradition of Judaism. The apostle Paul wasn’t the first to model this by any means, but he was a both a beneficiary and advocate of the practice. The tradition continued through the generations, and has been etched in the base of the Statue of Liberty in the poetry of Emma Lazarus. "*Mother of Exiles. Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me!"

The phrase "Conceived by the Holy Ghost" surely has something to do with how we live our lives, seeking to follow the way of God's incarnate child and those who raised him.

God has surely not given up on us. God is still coming to us and reaching out to us. And even though we may not fully understand all that God says to us in Jesus' birth, God in Christ has surely bridged heaven to earth.

We don't have to wait for December to sing "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas"... because in some ways, Christ is born whenever there is a tangible expression of God's love in human likeness, whenever God's love is expressed in flesh and blood. In Jesus' name. Amen.