

CHRISTMAS CONSPIRACY
Randall Tremba
December 22, 2013
Fourth Sunday in Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 7:10-16

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

[A young woman gives birth to a child and gives it a cool but common name. That's a *sign*?! Really?! It happens all the time. How could that be a "sign" unless there are deeper things in the ordinary that we don't normally notice!]

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

[Dismissed, I suppose, the way my righteous parents taught me to dismiss the idea of Protestants marrying Catholics as a bad idea, unholy—nothing good could come of it. And to dismiss interracial marriage for the same reasons; and the remarriage of divorce persons for the same reasons; and the marriage of same sex people for the same reasons—bad idea, unholy, nothing good will come of it.]

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no sexual relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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Not surprisingly, many of us find the "virgin birth" story a stumbling block in a way that pre-scientific people did not. We have microscopes, test tubes and questions they didn't have. We know things about conception, genetics, and embryos they didn't know. And we also know, though we often forget, that every birth is a miracle and every child, not just Jesus, is holy. And every child, not just Jesus, should be regarded so. We are all sons and daughters of God. But don't let it go to your head. Let it go to your heart instead.

Many of us for good reasons find the virgin birth story a stumbling block, hard to get past. But we don't have to take this story at face value any more than we take the seven-day story of creation in Genesis literally. They are both examples of stories that convey truth in a way that facts alone cannot.

Long before the birth of Jesus, a certain Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, was born of a Virgin. His birth was heralded by angels and he was proclaimed Son of God and Prince of Peace, or so the Roman Empire said. And, as it turns out, that "Prince of Peace" would kill anyone who got in the way of his or the Empire's quest for world peace, goodwill to all on earth.

Biblical stories, like the Christmas story, aim to move the heart more than the mind. Still, they must make some sense because, as Marcus Borg put it: *our hearts cannot long embrace what our minds reject.*

It's possible to over think the Christmas story and miss the enchantment, namely how two ordinary and unlikely people conspired to make room for something holy in their lives that at first appeared to be anything but holy.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss Mary quietly.

And why not? After all there's not a single sane man or woman on this planet—then, now or ever—who would believe Mary's angelic explanation—I don't care how straight her face, pious her tone or how many Hail Mary's she recited. I don't know, but I can guess Mary's own parents didn't believe that angelic bit for a second. All they knew was that something unseemly, something unholy had happened, something that had all the appearances of a tragedy or disaster.

By the way: we should not use this story to sanction every social scandal or every unwanted teenage pregnancy as a holy thing. That would be foolish and naive.

But we can let this story help us see "unexpected visitations" within or upon our lives as potential invitations, as invitations to find a way to bear love into our world. Life comes at us. We simply can't prevent certain things. All we can do is choose how to respond.

We can let this story help us see unexpected visitations within or upon our lives as potential invitations, as invitations to conspire with the divine and find a way to bear love into our world no matter what befalls us.

What made Jesus great, you see, was not his birth but his life, how he lived with and for others. We mustn't make Jesus into a freak of nature by making his birth freakish. Otherwise his life is nothing we could imitate. How could we live like him if it requires a freakish birth?

Like his ordinary parents, Joseph and Mary, Jesus found a way to transform the unholy and broken in his world into something whole and holy. It was and is the way of love. And it is a way we can be in this world when we are born, not

merely of flesh and blood, but born anew, which is to say, transformed by the spirit.

Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, welcomed outcasts, befriended saints and sinners, lifted up the fallen, and loved his enemies to death. He turned hearts of stone into hearts for love alone.

What was born in Mary may be born in us as well—not another baby Jesus—but rather a movement of the spirit, the spirit of compassion that loves all and fears nothing. As it turns out, the Christ spirit, by many different names, is as old as creation and as long as evolution. It waits and watches for those who say, Let it be. Here I am.

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HYMN: “Here I Am, Lord”